

BENJAMIN KEACH'S DOCTRINE OF THE HUMAN WILL

Introduction

The nature and freedom of the human will has been deliberated and debated throughout the history of the Christian church by some of the church's best and most gifted theologians, and it continues to be debated to this very day. It is one of those vital theological issues that serves as a touchstone of the rest of a theological system because it both shapes and is shaped by the whole body of doctrine articulated in a full-orbed and consistent biblical theology. Because it occupies such a prominent and central place in the matrix of any theology, the question of the nature and freedom of the will is never established or articulated in an historical or theological vacuum, but inevitably and always in light of the progress of the church's historical discussion and understanding of the nature of the will and the interconnection and unity of truths that compose any particular theological system.

Benjamin Keach's theology of the will reflects this reality inasmuch as it was articulated in light of the church's biblical theological understanding of his own time and was vitally related to the rest of his biblical theology. For his part, Keach stood squarely in the Reformed tradition, and held to the Calvinistic doctrine of the nature and freedom of the will. It was this Calvinistic perspective which he argued and defended so forcefully and consistently throughout his published material. For Keach, the doctrine of the will was not simply a matter of philosophical speculation or a secondary matter of theology, but instead, it was something integral and foundational to the gospel itself. It had immense theological and practical implications that were necessary for the godly worship and practice of the saints, which is why he persistently pressed its importance and value throughout his books and sermons, and vehemently opposed and warned against any view that eclipsed it. The thesis of this paper is that Benjamin Keach's

doctrine of the will can be understood in connection with his historical situation and with the rest of his theology.

The Doctrine of the Will in Historical Perspective

In the early church during the time of the church fathers Gnosticism was the greatest intellectual and heretical threat to Christianity. As a result, most of the formulations of the doctrine of the will during this period have either direct or indirect reference to that error. According to William Cunningham, “The discussions in which the early fathers were engaged had a tendency to lead them rather to magnify the power of man’s free-will, since fatalism, or something like it, deeply pervaded the Oriental and Gnostic systems; and it is chiefly on what some of them have said in magnifying man’s free-will, in opposition to fatalism that those . . . have taken their stand.”¹ Theologians in this class include Origen and the Greek fathers, but also Western fathers, such as Tertullian, Cyprian, and Ambrose. Unlike those in the East, the Western fathers were more likely to view the will as significantly corrupted by sin and in need of divine grace, though they also affirmed the essential freedom of the will, especially in discussions of the nature of the will before Adam’s sin.² The West held its emphasis on the doctrine of the corruption of the will in unresolved tension with its anti-Gnostic assertions of freedom until the time of Augustine.³ Benjamin Keach inherited the Western tradition’s tension between corruption and freedom, which was evident in the disputes of his day, though Keach himself sided with Augustine.

In his early writings, Augustine clearly affirmed the freedom of the will over and against Manichean dualism, arguing that evil did not arise from a principle independent of God, but that it arose from the human will, which is created by God and dependent upon God.⁴ The first

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William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, vol 1 (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1994), 324-325.

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Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1997), 128-130.

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Ibid., 130.

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Augustine, *The Problem of Free Choice*, *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 22 (New York: Newman, 1995), 138-142, 174, 189-201. The Pelagians later misunderstood this work to affirm their position, but in his retractions, Augustine makes it clear that this treatise was not addressing the question of man’s post-fall situation, but only the

major conflict pertaining to the nature of the will erupted between Augustine and Pelagius. This controversy with Pelagius was the turning point in all subsequent discussions of the will because the issues at stake were thoroughly defined and the lines between the two basic sides in the debate were clearly drawn. Pelagius encountered the views of Augustine when he moved to Rome and became a teacher there.⁵ He was essentially a moralist and opposed Augustine's teaching that human obedience depends on God's grace because he believed that Augustine's doctrine tended to licentious living. The ensuing theological dispute centered on four related points of theology: (1) the "freedom" of the will, (2) the notion of "sin," (3) the doctrine of "grace," and (4) the basis of "justification."⁶ Pelagius said that human beings have the power to keep God's commands by nature. By contrast, Augustine argued that fallen human nature is without the power to keep God's commands; therefore, God must provide grace to affect the obedience he requires. For Pelagius, the post-fall will is free; for Augustine, it is bound. For Pelagius, sin is an evil act; for Augustine, it is the propensity of fallen nature. For Pelagius, nature is grace; for Augustine, nature needs grace. For Pelagius, men merit justification by their works; for Augustine, God graciously promises to reward non-meritorious works with justification.⁷ The Synods of Mileve and Carthage in 416 and the Council of Ephesus in 431 condemned Pelagianism.⁸ The Synod of Orange finally adopted a moderate Augustinianism in 529 in which the necessity of grace was affirmed but the irresistibility of grace was denied.⁹ This dispute set the stage for all future discussions of the nature and freedom of the will, such that subsequent theologies either tended more toward Augustinianism or Pelagianism. Benjamin Keach found himself alive during a period in which various aspects of these same questions were hotly debated once again, especially

ontology of Manichean dualism. See pages 221-228.

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J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 357.

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Alistair E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 79.

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Ibid., 79-85.

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Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 137.

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Ibid., 138-139.

in terms of the four dimensions of dispute mentioned above.

During the middle ages, theologians basically adhered to the semi-Augustinianism (or semi-Pelagianism) outlined by the Synod of Orange, with a few exceptions. Gottschalk was an Augustinian who insisted that double predestination is the necessary implication of an Augustinian perspective on the will and grace.¹⁰ Anselm denied that freedom consists in indifference and said that true freedom is freedom to retain the good, such that one may be unable to sin, and yet truly free.¹¹ Though both of these positions are basically Augustinian in their orientation, the prevailing norm of the middle ages was a form of semi-Pelagianism, which tended to drift toward Pelagianism rather than Augustinianism. The semi-Pelagianism of the middle ages was one of the theological constructions of the will against which Keach had to contend in his own day.

At the time of the Reformation (1517-1603), both Luther and Calvin recovered and championed the Augustinian doctrine of the will, setting it against the medieval theology of their day.¹² Luther defended the Augustinian view of the will against attacks from Erasmus, arguing primarily from Scripture, and Calvin defended it against Pighius, arguing from history, Scripture, and plain reason.¹³

In England, the Calvinist (Augustinian) understanding of the will began to take hold around 1541, during the last six years of the life of King Henry VIII, and continued with strength for more than a generation afterward.¹⁴ Benjamin Keach was born in England in 1640 and died in 1704, which means that he lived during the great Puritan period when the various different perspectives on the will were competing for supremacy. This was a time during which the state-

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Ibid., 141.

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Ibid., 143-144.

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See FranHois Wendel *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mariet (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 188-191; Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999), 160-168.

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Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J.I. Packer & O.R. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1997); John Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defence of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius*, ed. A.N.S. Lane, trans. G.I. Davies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996).

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A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 2nd ed. (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1989), 222-224.

church of England came into bitter conflict with ministers who sought to reform the church.¹⁵ Arminian (or semi-Pelagian) views of the will were on the rise during this period of unrest. John Goodwin, who was a popular congregational preacher, clearly advanced and articulated Arminian principles.¹⁶ Arminianism was also generally associated with those who held “a high doctrine of episcopacy, accompanied by a love of ceremony and ritual church worship.”¹⁷ William Laud, himself an Arminian, became the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633 and began a program of enforcing a uniformity of ritual and practice upon the Church of England, which many considered to be a reversion to Roman Catholicism.¹⁸ Laud’s policies were one of the major catalysts that drove England into civil war, which was initiated by the Puritan Oliver Cromwell in 1645. Cromwell and his army were in firm control by 1649, but Puritanism had fractured and factions multiplied. In this climate Arminianism, Socinianism and forms of mystical antinomianism were becoming more popular.¹⁹ Toon writes:

The seventeenth century witnessed various forces modifying and extending Calvin’s doctrines of grace. Of these, three of the most important were Arminianism, New Methodism, and Federal Theology. The propagation of Arminian principles had a dual effect. It softened the ‘Calvinism’ of some (especially Anglicans), but by producing reaction in others caused the development of a rigid, high Calvinism (especially amongst Congregationalists) which placed great emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the divine decrees, and little emphasis on the universal offer of salvation.²⁰

While it is debatable that the Puritans of the seventeenth century “extended” Calvin’s Calvinism,²¹ the important thing to note is that the influence of Arminian doctrine was sharply felt among Calvinists and was something to which the Calvinists of this period believed themselves

¹⁵ Ibid., 367-376.

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Peter Toon, *Puritans and Calvinism* (Seoul, Korea: Westminster Publishing House, 1972), 9.

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Ibid., 25.

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Ibid., 31-35.

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Toon says, “We recall that within English religion there were many developments between 1647 and 1658. This was a great period for the sects – Quakers, Fifth Monarchy Men, Muggletonians, Ranters, etc. – and for errors and heresies like Arminianism, Socinianism, Pelagianism, and various forms of ‘natural religion.’” Ibid., 78.

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Ibid., 85-86.

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See Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 37-46, 73-84.

compelled to reply.

Of those who chose to “soften” Calvinism in response to this threat, Richard Baxter’s system proved to be the most destructive.²² Baxter held to unconditional election and believed that faith and repentance were unconditional blessings that flow from the divine decree, but he also affirmed that the faithful good works of Christians done out of obedience to the terms of the covenant of grace (a new law) serve as a ground of their justification before the bar of God’s judgment.²³ Though Baxter himself would have affirmed that God’s grace must effectually move the human will to keep the terms of the covenant of grace, his positive perspective on the human will’s involvement in justification and optimistic way of speaking about it led his followers and the generations who inherited his system to affirm that the will has powers in itself, which in turn led to thoroughgoing Arminian (and Socinian) notions.²⁴ Benjamin Keach spent a great deal of time and energy in his sermons and other published works responding to the faulty views of justification espoused by Richard Baxter and his followers, such as Daniel Williams and Samuel Clarke. Keach regarded these errors to be most damaging to Christ’s church.

Keach inherited the preceding theological background with respect to the Christian doctrine of the will and lived during a time in which all of these issues were being debated once again with creative twists. More than anything else, Keach sought to defend what he understood the Word of God to teach. He had no desire to prop up any particular theological system due to a perceived logical coherence or personal preference. He firmly believed that when Scripture is allowed to speak on its own terms, the Calvinist, or Augustinian, understanding of the will

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Baxter’s theology was not only a partial capitulation to the arguments of Arminianism, but it was also a reaction to popular forms of antinomian Calvinism, which he encountered while serving as a chaplain in Oliver Cromwell’s army. He met many soldiers who sinned liberally and without any apparent repentance, but still claimed the right and title to eternal life based on the imputed righteousness of Christ received by faith alone and without any works on their part. Walter Wilson, *The History and Antiquities of the Dissenting Churches*, vol. 2 (London: Button and Son, 1808; reprint, Paris: Baptist Standard Bearer: 2004), 111-135.

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Richard Baxter, *Aphorisms of Justification, With their Explication annexed. Wherein also is opened the nature of the Covenants, Satisfaction, Righteousness, Faith, Works, &c.* (London: n.p., 1649), 5-7, 70-75.

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Michael Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978. Reprint, 2002), 464-471. See also A.C. Fitzsimons Allison, *The Rise of Moralism: The Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 1966).

emerges as the clear biblical perspective, and that those who advance and defend a more Pelagian or Arminian construction of the nature and freedom of the will do so in direct contradiction to the plain teaching of the Bible.

Brief Theological Bibliography of Benjamin Keach²⁵

Benjamin Keach (1640-1704) was born to John and Feodora Keach.²⁶ When Keach was fifteen years old (1655), he was converted under the ministry of Matthew Mead, an Anglican minister, who was a warm evangelical Calvinist free from the taint of antinomianism.²⁷ But because Keach was convinced of believer's baptism and liberty of conscience, he sought to be baptized by immersion under the ministry of John Russel, who was a General Baptist pastor.²⁸ In 1558, when he was sixteen years old, Keach was set apart for the ministry.²⁹ Though Keach held Arminian notions of the will for a time, he soon became convinced of the Calvinist doctrine of the will, probably sometime after 1668 when he became the pastor of the Southwark church.³⁰ Austin

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Though Keach was involved in a number of related theological controversies, including the defense of believer's baptism, the purity of the local church, liberty of conscience, the laying on of hands and the Quakers, congregational hymn singing, and justification by faith alone on the ground of Christ's imputed righteousness, the following brief biographical information will emphasize and focus on his life in relation to the disputes on the nature and freedom of the will.

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For more biographical information on Keach, see William Cathcart, ed., *Baptist Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: L.H. Everts, 1881), s.v. "Keach, Rev. Benjamin," 637-638; Thomas Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists* (London: 1739), vol. ii, 185-209; vol iii, 143-147; vol. iv, 268-314; Michael A.G. Haykin, *Kiffin, Knollys, Keach: Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage* (Leeds: Reformation Today Trust, 1996), 82-103; Thomas J. Nettles, *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity*, vol. 1. (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 163-193; Adam A. Reid, "Benjamin Keach, 1640," *Baptist Quarterly* 10 (1940-1941): 67-78; James Barry Vaughn, "Benjamin Keach" in Timothy George and David Dockery, eds., *Baptist Theologians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1990) 49-76; Austin Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach* (Dundas: Joshua Press, 2004), 1-423; Walter Wilson, *The History and Antiquities of the Dissenting Churches*, vol. 4 (London: 1808), 243-252; Hugh Wamble, "Benjamin Keach, Churchman," *Quarterly Review* (April-June 1956): 29-34.

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Austin Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach* (Dundas, Canada: Joshua Press, 2004), 47-48. See also Matthew Mead, *The Almost Christian Discovered, or the False Professor Tried and Cast* (London, 1675. Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993).

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Ibid., 41.

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Thomas J. Nettles, *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity*, vol. 1 (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 163.

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Ibid., 338. Keach became the pastor of the Southwark church after the Clarendon Code had come into full effect by 1665. This code made it enormously difficult to minister as a dissenting minister and was the cause of much persecution.

Walker notes that Keach embraced Calvinistic ideas about the will through coming to a clearer understanding of the doctrine of justification as articulated by John Saltmarsh's book, *Free Grace: or the flowings of Christ's blood freely to sinners*, which was published in 1645.³¹ Though Saltmarsh, who was apparently an antinomian, was Keach's first instructor in these things, Keach himself never held antinomian convictions, but always affirmed that sinners and saints are responsible to obey God's commands. Later, when Keach's writings are examined, it will be clear how the doctrines of justification and the covenant of grace undergird Calvinist convictions about the will. Throughout his career, Benjamin Keach strenuously maintained a defense of the Calvinist understanding of the will, which both opposed the encroachments of Arminianism and set the doctrine in its proper relation to the rest of Scriptural theology. This sustained polemic is clearly seen in some of his most important works on the subject.

Keach's Writings and the Freedom of the Will

Many of the most significant of Keach's writings on the nature and freedom of the will were penned in the latter part of his life. During these last years, beginning at around 1690 at the time of the republication of Tobias Crisp's allegedly antinomian work, *Christ Alone Exalted*, controversies about the will and the nature of salvation raged. What follows is a survey of Keach's theological works and sermons that touch on the question of the will the most.³²

The Marrow of True Justification (1692)

This work contains two published sermons on Romans 4:5 in defense of the traditional Protestant doctrine of justification and in opposition to the prevailing errors of his time. First, Keach argues that justification by personal obedience is impossible because the human will is poisoned and corrupted by the fall, unable to render satisfying obedience to God. He wrote, "All the faculties of the soul are corrupted, viz., their minds and understandings are blind and

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Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach*, 50-51.

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In Keach's writings after 1690, the influence of a number of noted Puritan theologians can be clearly seen. Those theologians included William Bates, Stephen Charnock, Isaac Chauncy, John Cotton, Thomas Goodwin, Thomas Manton, John Owen, Samuel Petto, and Matthew Poole. See Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach*, 252.

darkened, being ignorant of God, or without the knowledge of his pure and spotless nature,” and went on to say that “he [Paul] shows also the poison and venom that was got into the will.”³³ As a result of this utter corruption of the will, justification can in no way be by human exertions to render obedience to God, since no such obedience could ever be acceptable to him.³⁴ This is why Scripture says that God only justifies those who do not work for justification and that He justifies the ungodly (Rom 4:5) who have not even attempted to will their way to justification.³⁵

The chief problem with Richard Baxter and Daniel Williams, according to Keach, was that they believed and taught that God actually justifies the godly on the basis of their faithful working, but according to Keach this stands in direct opposition to the clearest statements of God’s Word.³⁶ Scripture teaches that justification is given to ungodly people, not to the godly. It further teaches that God justifies by faith and not by works, but Baxter and Williams insisted that evangelical faith includes and involves works of obedience to the covenant of grace or “baptismal covenant.”³⁷

In the second sermon, Keach goes on to argue that the human will is so corrupted by the pollution inherited from Adam that it cannot perform any truly good works either before or after justification. The Bible insists that justification is a gift of pure grace, and that if works of the human will are involved in justification, then grace is no longer grace (Rom 11:6). This section is highly reminiscent of Augustine’s arguments against Pelagius.

Keach affirmed that the Bible says that justification is by faith and not by works of any kind. Justification is by faith because faith “contrary to any other grace of the Spirit, carries the soul out of himself to Christ . . . looking by faith upon Christ, we come to be justified.”³⁸ Faith,

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Benjamin Keach, *The Marrow of True Justification or, Justification without Works. Containing the Substance of Two Sermons lately preached on Rom. 4:5. And by the Importunity of some gracious Christians, now published with some additions* (London: n.p., 1692), 3.

³⁴ Ibid., 4.

³⁵

Ibid., 6-7.

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Ibid, 11-15.

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Ibid., 15-17.

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though a virtue in itself, contributes nothing to the ground of the verdict of justification, but only justifies as it joins the believer to Christ and his perfect righteousness, which alone satisfies divine justice. Faith, hope, love, and sincere obedience would be wholly insufficient to do anything to merit justification in God's sight because they cannot remit former sins and because the human will is not wholly freed from the pollution of Adam.³⁹

Thus, part of Keach's polemic against Baxter and Williams included a rehearsal of the Calvinistic, or Augustinian, doctrine of the will. The will is unable to do anything that God would ever deem truly or properly righteous, such that a person could be justified by his acts.⁴⁰

The Everlasting Covenant (1693)

In this sermon preached at the funeral of Henry Forty on January 25, 1693, Keach provides several reasons that the covenant of grace should not be distinguished from the covenant of redemption, but that the two should be viewed as one and the same covenant.⁴¹ His text was 2 Samuel 23:5, "For does not my house stand so with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. For will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire," and he aimed to preach about the dying hope of David, which was the everlasting covenant. David did not depend on his own works of righteousness, but on the unconditional promise of the everlasting covenant. Regarding the nature of this covenant, that it is one covenant with two parts, Keach wrote, "And therefore I see not (I say) but that they are one and the same covenant of grace, yet so as that Christ has his part, work and reward distinct from us; he hath all by hard work, and merit, that we might have the blessings he merited freely by grace alone."⁴² So, the covenant of grace is a covenant of works and merit for Christ, but of unconditional and pure

Ibid., 21.

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Ibid., 32-33.

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See also Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach*, 342-347.

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Benjamin Keach, *The Everlasting Covenant, A Sweet Cordial for a Drooping Soul or, The Excellent Nature of the Covenant of Grace Opened in a Sermon Preached January the 29th at the Funeral of Mr. Henry Forty* (London: n.p., 1693), 1-44.

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Ibid., 6.

blessing and benefit for the elect in him. According to Austin Walker, “The covenant of grace assumed a central place in Keach’s thinking, so much that it is not possible to appreciate either Keach’s Calvinism or the man himself without a right appreciate of his understanding of it.”⁴³

Some, however, objected to Keach’s construction of the covenant of grace because they claimed it fails to account for the fact that faith is a condition of involvement in the covenant on the part of the elect. But, on the basis of Isaiah 44:3 and Ezekiel 36:27, Keach says, “I would know whether faith, which is called the condition of the covenant of grace, was not the fruit of Christ’s suffering in pursuit of that holy compact?”⁴⁴ He goes on to affirm that faith is not properly considered a condition of the covenant of grace but a blessing of it. Christ’s work in the covenant of grace to live a perfectly holy life and die a substitutionary death in the place of the elect purchased and secured the blessing of faith for the elect, such that it inevitably becomes theirs at the appointed time. In this way, Christ’s covenantal obedience is the legal foundation of God’s turning the wills of the elect by giving them new hearts and effectually working in them to cause them to believe.

Keach vehemently opposed all schemes of covenant theology that separated the covenant of redemption from the covenant of grace in order to undergird a fundamentally synergistic soteriology. Such systems said that Christ does his part in salvation through the covenant of redemption, but that man must do his part in salvation through the covenant of grace in order to obtain eternal life in the end. He wrote that some teach, “Repent, believe, and live a godly life to the end of their days, which God has given all men *power* to do, if they do but exercise that *power*.”⁴⁵ But, Keach opposed the idea that men have any such “power” of will, and said that this sort of view is “the worst of all, and it seems to be calculated, rather to unfold Arminianism, than to establish sound divinity.”⁴⁶ According to Keach, Christ’s work in the

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Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach*, 107.

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Ibid., 13.

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Ibid., 15. Emphasis mine.

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Ibid.

everlasting covenant of grace purchases and secures the work of the Holy Spirit, which leads and effectually bends the wills of the elect to faith and godliness. He said:

The work and office of the Spirit, in this covenant, is to quicken all the Father has given to Christ. The Spirit renews, regenerates or renovates our souls; it is the Spirit that works God's image in us . . . The glory of the Holy Ghost shines forth in the covenant of grace . . . for it is the Spirit that infuses new habits, divine and gracious qualities of the soul, new thoughts, new desires, new and holy affections, new delights, joy, peace, and consolation.⁴⁷

So, according to Keach, the office of the Holy Spirit is to secure and maintain the godly and gracious operations of the will on the basis of Christ's meritorious work in the everlasting and intra-Trinitarian covenant of grace.

This covenant of grace has both objective and subjective blessings. Objective blessings include such things as justification, adoption, and vindication, while subjective blessings include regeneration, love, faith, good works, perseverance, and glorification. All of these things flow to the elect from Christ by the Holy Spirit. Keach insists that none of them depend on any first motion of the human will toward Christ; rather, all of them come on an unconditional *basis*: the unilateral first application of the covenant to the elect through the Spirit.⁴⁸

From Christ's perspective the covenant of grace is truly a covenant contracted chiefly between his Father and him, such that its blessings are based on Christ's obedience to its stipulations. But, from the perspective of the elect, the covenant of grace is more like a testament, which comes into effect upon the death of Christ, releasing the promised blessings to them.⁴⁹

At the end of the sermon, Keach applies its substance to the subject of death and says:

O! at the hour of death, how can you lift up thy hands to plead thy own sincere obedience, when thou art just going to stand before the tribunal of God; thy hand will be weak and thy heart faint, and thy confidence will deceive thee, and fail thee: if thy hope and desire, thy faith and dependence be on anything else, than on Christ in this covenant; but here is succour in this covenant; here is a salve for every sore; what tho' though has sinned, what says God in this covenant? "I will be merciful unto their unrighteousness, and their sins and iniquities I will remember no more," Heb 8.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid., 27.

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Ibid., 31-33.

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Ibid., 37.

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Ibid., 38.

Keach believed that if sinners had to trust in their own wills and in their power to perform sufficiently for acceptance before God, then there would be no hope. The only hope for sinners in death is the Lord Jesus Christ and his righteous accomplishment in the covenant of grace.

Thus, Keach's doctrine of the covenant of grace takes seriously the fallen condition of the human will and accounts for the fact that a fallen will can do nothing toward obeying any of God's instructions apart from the effectual grace of God moving it to obey. He also clearly taught that God's saving operations upon the human will proceed from the legal foundation of Christ's objective work in the covenant of grace to fulfill all righteousness. Keach's doctrine of the will cannot be divorced from his understanding of the covenant of grace.

In this way, Keach and the other covenant theologians of the seventeenth century advanced and clarified discussions of the nature of the will beyond the categories that were primarily discussed in the disputes between Augustine and Pelagius. While the semi-Pelagians of the middle ages did indeed affirm a connection between the biblical covenants and the will,⁵¹ it was not part of the standard theological presentation of the day to tie the operations of the will to the intra-Trinitarian covenant in the manner Keach did.⁵²

A Golden Mine Opened (1694)

This book consists of a number of sermons on four different texts. The first set of sermons was preached on Matthew 3:12, in which Keach wrote of God's judgment against the mixed character of the Anglican Church on the ground that the new covenant, unlike the old covenant, is a covenant of believers only.⁵³ The second set of sermons was the largest, and it was preached on John 10:27-28 to describe the character of Christ's sheep and to elucidate the doctrine

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This medieval, semi-Pelagian, and Ockhamist connection between the freedom of the will and the covenants of Scripture is one of the reasons Martin Luther distanced himself from covenantal theology. Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 267-276.

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Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology* (New York: University Press of America, 1999), 9-102.

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Benjamin Keach, *A Golden Mine Opened or, The Glory of God's Rich Grace Displayed in the Mediator to Believers. And His Direful Wrath against Impenitent Sinners. Containing the Substance of near Forty Sermons upon Several Subjects* (London: n.p., 1694), 2-70.

of the perseverance of the saints.⁵⁴ In these sermons, “Keach took the zoom lens and focused closer attention on one specific part of the covenant of grace (or peace), namely, the perseverance of the saints. Keach presents the biblical case for this doctrine.”⁵⁵ The third set of sermons dealt with Hebrews 6:4-6, warning against apostasy,⁵⁶ while he preached the fourth and final sermon series from Hebrews 2:3 on the greatness of Christ’s salvation.⁵⁷

The most important of these sermon series with respect to Keach’s teaching on the nature of the will was the one on the “Blessedness of Christ’s Sheep” in which he preached from John 10. Here Keach makes eleven arguments for the doctrine of the saints’ final perseverance. The first, second, and third arguments rest on the eternal, sovereign, and unconditional election of God. Because God has chosen the elect by grace and purposed to save them to the uttermost, there is nothing they can do to prevent God from accomplishing his purpose.⁵⁸ Even though they may be faint of heart and feel as though they might fall, God’s eternal purpose of grace ensures that he will work in them to will and to work for his good pleasure.

The fourth and fifth arguments are from the everlasting love of Jesus Christ manifested in his incarnation, death, and resurrection. Christ’s love for the elect in the everlasting covenant secures their final perseverance and so renders it certain that the elect will not and cannot turn themselves away from him.⁵⁹ Keach wrote, “O happy believers! You are not left to your own covenanting with God, to *the power of your own wills*; nor do you stand upon your own legs, but you are in God’s covenant, in Christ’s covenant; *you are committed into Christ’s hand to keep*.”⁶⁰

Keach’s sixth argument is from the new birth. He says that the nature of the new birth

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Ibid., 75-317. See also Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach*, 260-266.

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Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach*, 261.

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Keach, *A Golden Mine Opened*, 318-385.

⁵⁷

Ibid., 387-500.

⁵⁸

Ibid., 167.

⁵⁹

Ibid., 202-211. Keach rehearses his views on the covenant of grace in this section, which are most fully explained in his sermon, *The Everlasting Covenant*.

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Ibid., 204. Emphasis mine.

makes it impossible that anyone who has been born again could willfully turn away from God. The newly implanted life of God is a permanent fixture in the heart of a believer, and so he may never fall from a state of true grace.⁶¹

The seventh, eighth, and ninth arguments for perseverance come from the fact that when the elect are united to Christ by faith, they become his bride. Christ will fight for his bride and will not let her be destroyed. He has proven his love for her by dying for her and rising again, and when he did so, he rescued his bride from death and ensured that she would not fall away from him, but would always remain with him no matter how imperfect and fluctuating her will might be.⁶²

The tenth and eleventh arguments have to do with the Father's powerful grip upon the saints and with the nature of saving faith. The Father will not release the sheep to death and in order to ensure that they will not die, he gave them a kind of faith that endures to the end.⁶³

In each of these arguments, God is represented as totally sovereign over the human will. He turns it wherever he wishes, and it is his intention to preserve his saints in faith and godliness to the end. These sermons are immensely pastoral, carefully crafted to provide comfort and encouragement to the church to help them endure trials and persevere in faith. In the midst of the many pastoral exhortations, Keach made a number of statements that provide some insight into his understanding of the will. He clearly affirms the total *moral inability* of the unregenerate: "In men spiritually dead, there is a disability or impotency unto all spiritual things to be performed in a spiritual manner; they can perform or act spiritually no act of life, or do anything that is absolutely accepted of him."⁶⁴ The unregenerate can do nothing toward their own salvation. But, on the other hand, Keach also apparently had a doctrine of natural ability, though it was quite different from the doctrine that Jonathan Edwards would later espouse. Keach wrote:

⁶¹

Ibid., 212.

⁶²

Ibid., 223, 260.

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Ibid., 286.

⁶⁴

Ibid., 145.

True a *wicked* man is naturally alive, and his soul is in his body, and he is endowed with understanding, will, and affection, and *may perform many* duties God requires of him: But what of this? For in spiritual life the Holy Ghost is unto the soul, what the soul is unto the body, in respect of natural life, namely, the quickening principle. And (as a learned author well observes) to deny such a quickening principle of spiritual life, superadded unto us by the grace of Christ, distinct and separate from the *natural faculties* of the soul, is upon the matter to renounce the whole gospel: It is all one as to deny that Adam was created in the image of God, which he lost, and that we are renewed unto the image of God by Jesus Christ.⁶⁵

Apparently, by saying that a wicked man has “natural faculties,” he only means to say that unbelievers have some capacity to do outwardly things that God requires. Keach does not say that lost men have the natural faculty to do all that God requires, but only that they may perform “many duties” in the sense of physical and external obedience to the law. Keach goes on to deny that spiritual obedience is possible without the quickening principle added by the grace of Christ. To say that men have power in themselves, by their own wills and without grace, to act pleasingly toward God is “to renounce the whole gospel.”

Keach also gives several reasons that he opposes the notions of those who would ascribe any moral power to the wills of fallen men. Those who hold such faulty views say, “all are put into a capacity to be saved, if they will believe, repent, and continue in believing and in well-doing to the end,” such that “all is at the *determination of man’s own will*, whether any one will be saved or not.”⁶⁶ Keach’s objections to their scheme are that (1) the “whole glory” of our salvation is ascribed to man rather than to God, (2) salvation is rendered absolutely uncertain, and (3) it is in direct conflict with the clear teaching of Scripture.⁶⁷

Therefore, it is evident from *A Golden Mine Opened* that Keach understood salvation from beginning to end to be dependent upon God’s will and not upon man’s will, and he argued that God always finishes what he starts in the heart of a believer. He believed that to say otherwise is to invite serious error with disastrous practical and theological repercussions.

Keach’s insistence on the fact that when God regenerates a person, he gives the will a

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Ibid., 146-147. Emphasis mine. The notes to the side of the text indicate that the “learned author” Keach mentions is John Owen, but it is not certain whether that note is from the editor or Keach himself.

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Ibid., 205.

⁶⁷

Ibid., 205-206. Emphasis mine.

new nature of such a character that it cannot fall away advances somewhat beyond Augustine and clarifies some ambiguities in his doctrine. While Augustine was a monergist in his understanding of conversion, he also apparently affirmed baptismal regeneration and believed that those who are baptized may indeed fall away from the faith. Keach insisted that all who are born again persevere to the end.

Articles of Faith of the Church of Christ or Congregation Meeting at Horsley-Down (1697)

This was the confession of faith received by the Southwark church in 1697, written and signed by Keach. Here we find not only that Keach affirmed that the human will depends on grace in its fallen state, but also that it enjoyed some measure of freedom prior to the fall. In section eight titled, “Of Man’s Free Will,” the confession states:

We believe man in his state of innocency had freedom of will to do good; but by the fall he hath utterly lost all that power and ability, being woefully depraved in all the faculties of his soul; there being in the will and mind of all naturally much enmity against God, and a total aversion to him, and to everything that is spiritually good; loving darkness, and rebelling against the light. But when a man is renewed by divine grace, though there is no force put upon the will, yet it is made willing, and acts freely, in the day of God’s power: though the work is not perfect in any faculty in the regenerate, nor will be in this life.⁶⁸

Here we have a window into the structure of Keach’s thinking on the freedom of the will. It has four stages: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. The human will was free “to do good” at creation. It lost all freedom to do good and retained only “total aversion” to God after the fall. Upon redemption, it willingly and without compulsion does good, but it is “not perfect.” He then implies that in the consummation, the human will is made perfect, since it will not be “in *this* life.” The confession also confirms a number of things already mentioned, including the polluted nature inherited from Adam, fallen man’s inability to keep God’s law, and the efficacy of God’s grace upon the will in the new covenant through conversion, sanctification and perseverance, all on the ground of unconditional election. Thus, Keach’s doctrine of the will stands connected to his whole theological outlook and cannot be divorced from that interconnected body of doctrine. It also appears simply to embrace what was inherited from Augustine with respect to the powers of

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Benjamin Keach, *The Articles of the Faith of the Church of Christ or Congregation meeting at Horsley-down, Benjamin Keach, Pastor, As asserted this 10th of the 6th month, 1697* (London: n.p. 1697), 7-8.

the will before the fall.

The Display of Glorious Grace (1698)

This book of sermons adds little to what has already been said about the will, since it is primarily a detailed explanation and outworking of Keach's doctrine of the covenant of grace. However, it does more clearly declare Keach's mind with respect to the covenant of works and the power of Adam's will before the fall to satisfy the terms of that covenant. Keach wrote:

Brethren! Pray consider, the first covenant required perfect righteousness of man as the condition of his justification, and that not enjoined by the Holy God as a simple act of his sovereignty (as some conclude) but as it resulted from his holiness, and the rectitude of his nature: it being inconsistent with the justice, holiness, or purity of God's nature, to justify any man who is not perfectly righteous, or wholly without sin, even in thought, word, and actions. . . . Adam before the fall *had power to answer* this covenant of perfect righteousness, and which he was obliged to do; yet had no surety to engage to God for him.⁶⁹

In no way should this be seen to suggest that Keach believed that Adam had contra-causal or libertarian freedom prior to the fall, but only that his will had not yet been corrupted by the fall, such that it was morally able not to sin and to fulfill all the terms of the covenant of works for justification. Before the fall, Adam's will had the power to sin and the power not to sin.

While Keach does not attempt any explanation of the causes of Adam's fall or try to provide an account of how a creature who was created with an upright nature was able to choose evil, he does affirm what Scripture affirms, that Adam was created good, and seems to content himself with that. Here again, like Augustine, Keach does not attempt any kind of detailed philosophical explanation of the inner workings of the will or of human psychology, but instead makes the theological affirmation that the human will lacked nothing that it required to do good prior to the fall.

Exposition of the Parables (1701)

These expositions are the result of twelve years of study and were published only three

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Benjamin Keach, *The Display of Glorious Grace or, The Covenant of Peace Opened. In Fourteen Sermons Lately Preached, in which the Errors of the present day, about Reconciliation and Justification are Detected* (London: n.p., 1698), 16.

years before Keach's death.⁷⁰ They are immensely pastoral in nature, aimed at the conversion and sanctification of his hearers, always cognizant of the different kinds of hearers, including "those who were very ignorant, those who were mortally wounded, those partially healed, those who know and cast off Christ, those who delay, and those who are healed."⁷¹ Keach favored parables because they are so memorable and unfold spiritual truths in a graphic way. Because Keach's aim was to edify God's people, he felt compelled to confront and refute some of the prevailing errors of his day; thus, in some sections of the work, there is a polemical tone by which Keach aims to warn people against various popular heresies.⁷²

Keach treats some forty-eight parables in this collection; so, it would be impossible to survey all of them. But, one of them has a good number of important things to say about the nature of salvation and of the human will. Parable number thirty-two, "The Marriage Supper," deals with God's invitation of sinners to come to the supper, with his great patience and sincerity in calling men to come to Christ for salvation and to be joined to him in vital marital union for their justification and sanctification. One of the most important things visible in this parable is the manner in which Keach describes the external call. Even though Keach affirmed that the human will is fallen, totally depraved, and unable to make any first motions toward God, he also believed that God promiscuously invites and commands all men everywhere to believe and repent of their sins and that Christian ministers should do the same. This kind of direct appeal to sinners occurs throughout the sermon. One example of the universal call is where Keach wrote:

It is an often repeated offer and invitation, 'and he sent other servants.' God tries what one minister may do; but if sinners will not hear him, hearken to him, or come at his bidding, he sends another, another after him, 'Go say to them that were bidden, all things are now ready.' Maybe, some of you have been invited an hundred times, to come to Christ, to believe in Christ; yea, a thousand times, and yet refuse. O! how inexcusable will God leave sinners, that eternally perish. 'I have called and you have refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof.' Certainly, such who make light of this invitation, are such that do thus, i.e., they are set at

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Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach*, 266.

⁷¹

Ibid., 268.

⁷²

Ibid., 266-269.

nought all God's counsel, and condemn his love and favor extended to them.⁷³

Keach clearly affirms that God extends an "offer and invitation" to many "sinners" and they "refuse." This sincere invitation forms part of the ground of their guilt; it renders them "inexcusable." Such language shows that Keach affirmed duty-faith and the responsibility of everyone who hears the gospel to respond to it in faith. Though he does not explain how sinners who are unable to incline their wills to salvation can be held responsible, he sees it taught in the Scriptures and so affirms it.

In connection with the free offer and universal call to faith, Keach taught that there is a twofold call in the gospel. There is an external call and an internal call. The external call renders men responsible to believe, while the internal call makes them believe. Keach said:

There is a twofold call; the one is common, the other is special; the one ineffectual, the other effectual; yet the first will leave the creature without the least excuse, because they did not so far adhere to that which they were able to do. No man, my brethren, ever did improve that power, and means of light and grace, who is damned, which he might have done.⁷⁴

Here Keach provides some insight into how he understood human responsibility to believe working in conjunction with God's sovereign gift of belief. In the "common" call, men are responsible to do what they are "able to do." They are not damned for what they cannot do, but for what they could do but did not do. Then Keach goes on to say that no one who does what he is able to do and improves "that power" will ever go to hell. Therefore, Keach seems to be saying that lost human beings have some manner of capacity in their wills to turn toward God. He also seems to be saying that those who make use of that capacity will be saved. He does not, however, explain why or how it is that none but the elect ever make use of the power that all lost people might use if they would but choose to do so. It appears that he had in mind something vaguely like the distinction that would much later become commonplace: the distinction between natural and moral ability.

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Benjamin Keach, *Exposition of the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1974), 611. Keach also writes, "It is a large and comprehensive invitation; it is to *all sinners*, none by name exempted; so that one has no more cause or reason, to say I am not comprehended in it, any more than another. . . . It is a *pressing* and *most earnest* invitation." Ibid., 612. Emphasis mine.

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Ibid., 550.

In making these assertions, Keach was in no way thinking of affirming an Arminian notion of the will. He wrote:

Let those who are tainted with the errors of Arminianism, or Baxterianism, think of this, who strive to mix the King's wine with their muddy water, or mix their polluted works with God's free grace. *How doth he loathe their notions of free will*, and their own righteousness! Do they think to be the more welcome at this wedding, because, forsooth they would, through the pride of their base hearts, help God, and bear some part of the charge of this feast? As if the Almighty Jehovah. Was not rich or able enough, to do all Himself alone! Oh I how fain would sorry man have somewhat to boast of, and glory in, of their own, and God not have the whole honor of our salvation?⁷⁵

From this, it is clear that Keach vehemently opposed "Arminianism" and "Baxterianism." The idea that the human will in its own power could contribute or originate anything toward salvation was utterly repulsive to Keach. Any such idea would take away the gracious character of salvation and rob God of his glory. He said, "This marriage union does not depend on the will, and good pleasure of man, not on the creature. No, for shall the corrupt will of man, be the rule of God's will?"⁷⁶ Keach believed instead that if the will turns toward Christ in the least, God is the one who turned it. He wrote, "We must be drawn to Christ by the Father, and by the effectual influences of the Holy Ghost, if ever we are united to Jesus Christ, the Spirit is the bond of this union."⁷⁷ So, while all men are invited and in some sense all men may make use of what they are able to do in order to come to Christ, only those who are effectually drawn by the Spirit of God ever come to Christ to be united to him. It is a marriage owing solely to the sovereign work of God. Keach said, "It is no easy thing for a poor sinner to fall in love with Jesus Christ. It is *not in the power of a man's will*, to tie this conjugal knot, or unite his heart to the Lord Jesus, but it must be by the agency of the mighty God, or by the power of the Holy Spirit."⁷⁸

From his work on the parables, it is most evident that Keach saw no incompatibility between the total inability of sinners to believe and the universal responsibility of sinners to

⁷⁵

Ibid., 595.

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Ibid., 589.

⁷⁷

Ibid., 592.

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Ibid., 591.

believe. Though all men have some kind of ability to respond to the external call, only the elect will ever actually respond to that call because God quickens only them through the efficacious operations of the Spirit by the internal call.

Conclusion

It is therefore clear that Benjamin Keach's doctrine of the will was formed in light of preceding historical discussions of the will, and it even foreshadowed discussions that would come. Keach's doctrine of the will was fully integrated into the rest of his theology, touching upon a number of related theological truths in his system.

Keach's day inherited the disputes of the past with respect to the nature of the will, which were able to come to the foreground of theological discussion because of the religious strife and struggles for liberty that characterized the time period. Keach essentially embraced an Augustinian doctrine of the will, over and against both Pelagian and semi-Pelagian alternatives. He believed that the Augustinian doctrine of the will was necessarily born out of careful attention to the Word of God. Even though he inherited the great Augustinian tradition on the will, he was no blind adherent, but applied his view of the will to covenant, justification, and perseverance in ways Augustine and his contemporary followers apparently did not.

Furthermore, while he lacked a certain measure of clarity and precision on the subject, Keach anticipated future discussions on the relationship between natural and moral abilities (or capacities). He plainly affirmed that there is some sense in which even totally depraved reprobates are able to do what God commands them to do. But, Keach was equally insistent that only those who are effectually drawn by the Holy Spirit will ever actually do what God commands. There is no indication that Keach even approached the kinds of conclusions that the hyper-Calvinists of the following century made with respect to the "modern question." Keach faithfully, consistently, and promiscuously called all men to come to Christ for salvation by faith and repentance.

Keach's doctrine of the human will must be understood in light of the interconnected body of truth that he believed and taught. It must be seen in light of the Trinity, and particularly with respect to the eternal intra-Trinitarian covenant of grace. From eternity, the Father chose the

elect to redeem them and change them into the likeness of Christ. Jesus Christ covenanted to live a perfect life, die, and rise again on their behalf to purchase them for salvation. Keach understood that the human will was incapable of meriting justification and incapable of turning itself to Christ for sanctification. The Holy Spirit covenanted to apply the work of Christ to the elect, uniting them to Christ for their justification in Him and renewing their wills so that they could be sanctified.

Keach also related the doctrine of the will to creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. At creation, the human will was able to sin and able not to sin. Adam had the freedom of will to fulfill all righteousness, but he also had the freedom to sin and fall. Since Adam chose to sin, God cursed Adam with a fallen will, which is incapable of willing any good whatsoever. It can do nothing in its fallen state to turn itself toward God for salvation. However, in redemption, God makes the wills of the elect able and willing to trust in Christ for justification and to obey him in sanctification. Once God has implanted the seed of regeneration into the hearts of the elect, they are changed creatures, such that they are unable and unwilling to turn finally away from Christ. In their redeemed state, the elect are able to sin and able not to sin, but they cannot fall finally away from a state of grace. Finally, Keach teaches that in the consummate state, the wills of the elect lose their ability to sin, and retain only the ability not to sin.

Therefore, Benjamin Keach had a fully developed doctrine of the will, which was developed in light of the past and looked toward the future. It was inseparable from the rest of his theological system and must be understood in light of the whole. Keach sought to derive his doctrine of the will from the Scriptures alone, and he believed that plain teaching on this point is vital to the life and health of God's people. Only a clear understanding of the nature of the will enables Christ's church to enjoy a deep understanding of God's grace and to give all the glory to God for their salvation.