

“The True Sense and Meaning of the Holy Scriptures”: The Reformed Hermeneutic of Benjamin Keach¹

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INTRODUCTION

“Benjamin Keach, you are here convicted, for writing, printing and publishing, a seditious and schismatical book.”² Thus bellowed the judge sentencing Benjamin Keach, the Baptist (1640–1704), for his writings in the book *The Child’s Instructor; or, a new and easy Primer*. The “seditious and schismatical” teachings in this book were believer’s baptism and the millennial reign of Christ. While it seems fantastical to us today that such doctrines would result in a person being thrown in jail, placed in a pillory, and made to watch his books burned, this was the reality of Benjamin Keach with similar occurrences for other dissenting leaders in seventeenth-century England. This persistent belief during this century that Baptists were at worst dangerous and heretical schismatics or at best second-class citizens

caused many Baptists and their ministers to suffer much during this era. All this occurred despite persistent efforts, especially from Particular Baptists, to show themselves orthodox, Reformed, and loyal to the Crown.³

Both time and the hard work of Particular Baptists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have allowed for us today to see that such Baptists do indeed stand within the Reformed tradition. Among the prominent Particular Baptist leaders and pastors of this period who faithfully proclaimed God's word and worked for the removal of these prejudices was Benjamin Keach. One key area in which the early Particular Baptists stood within the Reformed tradition was in their framing of the single sense or meaning of Scripture. In this essay, I will examine the hermeneutics of Benjamin Keach related to the sense or meaning of Scripture and demonstrate that Keach advocated for a standard Reformed approach to the meaning of Scripture. To do this, I will first give a short biography of Keach's life and ministry to familiarize readers with this early Baptist minister, and then I will move to an examination of Keach's relevant works. Lastly, I will compare his ideas with those of Francis Turretin whose approach to the meaning of Scripture represents the mainstream Reformed approach on the matter.

THE LIFE OF BENJAMIN KEACH

On February 29, 1640, Benjamin Keach was born to John and Joyce Keach, who baptized Benjamin, along with his six siblings, in the local Anglican parish church.⁴ Being a family without means, Benjamin's parents were not able to provide him a formal education. After first working in a trade, "his capacious soul soon aspired after higher things."⁵ Although not much is known about Keach's conversion and his process of becoming convinced of believer's baptism, evidently Keach at the age of fifteen came to be persuaded of his need to be baptized as a believer after much study of Scripture.⁶ This baptism was performed by John Russel, a General Baptist, and sometime afterward, Keach joined the General Baptist congregation in Buckinghamshire.⁷

After marrying Jane Grove of Winslow (d. 1670) with whom Keach had three surviving children, Keach was called to serve as pastor in a General Baptist church in Winslow. These early years of Keach's ministry

saw persecution come with the restoration of Charles II.⁸ The arrest, unjust trial, sentencing, and brutal punishment of Keach recounted in the introduction above occurred as a result of Keach's first publication titled, *The Child's Instructor; or, a new and easy Primer* (1664).⁹

Having been baptized and discipled in the General Baptist way, Keach was persuaded of the Arminian teachings common to the General Baptists. Once, however, Keach came to London “where he had a greater opportunity of consulting both men and books,” and learned the doctrinal differences between the General and Particular Baptist groups. Keach “examined the point more closely, and in a few years came to such a determination as fixed his judgment in this point for his whole lifetime afterwards.”¹⁰ Keach had become a convinced Particular Baptist. As Michael Haykin writes, this move was likely influenced by his newfound acquaintance Hanserd Knollys. After his wife Jane died in 1670, Keach married Susannah Partridge (d. 1732) in 1672, and Knollys officiated the ceremony.¹¹ Also in 1672, Keach began a Particular Baptist church on Tooley Street in Horselydown, Southwark.¹²

During his ministry at Horselydown, Keach “perhaps more than any other Baptist of the last quarter of the seventeenth century, committed his convictions to paper in an attempt to establish church polity among his fellow Baptists, and to support and defend Baptists as they continued their efforts to justify their religious existence in both pre- and post-Toleration England.”¹³ The two main controversies which occupied his public ministry were his defense of the declining cause of Calvinism and the hymn-singing controversy.¹⁴ Writing the works *The marrow of Justification* (1692), *A Medium betwixt two Extremes* (1698), and *Gospel Mysteries Unveil'd* (1704), Keach proclaimed the sovereign electing grace of God, the total depravity of sinners, the sacrifice of Christ for the elect, justification by faith, and the free offer of the gospel to all. During the hymn-singing controversy, Keach led the cause of the goodness and biblical nature of hymn singing, publishing works such as *The Breach Repaired in God's Worship* (1691).¹⁵ Finally, after approximately thirty years of faithful ministry, Benjamin Keach died on July 18, 1704, of “distemper.”¹⁶ Of the legacy of Keach, Nettles states, “largely owing to the energy of Keach, Baptists had become a definitive force in the development of English Dissent.”¹⁷

KEACH ON THE SENSE(S) OF SCRIPTURE

While Keach differed from other Reformed brethren on specific interpretive issues such as baptism's mode and subjects, his broader biblical hermeneutic was in step with the Reformed tradition. Of his work in *Tropologia* (1681), Keach states that he has "kept all along within the Bounds of that Gravity, and Orthodoxy of Matter, which the Christian Religion Requires, and the Reformed Protestants profess."¹⁸ Of course, on a topic as broad as biblical interpretation, several nuances to Keach's approach to biblical interpretation or to his theological place among Reformed Protestants and even Particular Baptists could be noted.¹⁹ For our purposes and given the constraints of this work, however, we will focus on how Keach construed the sense(s) of Scripture in relation to the Reformed tradition.

To summarize his views before turning to the specifics, Keach believed that there is but one true sense of any passage of Scripture, although in cases of OT typology this sense is composed of a direct literal sense and indirect mystical sense. The pertinent works of Keach which will be examined here are his *Tropologia* (1681),²⁰ some published sermons titled *The Counterfeit Christian* (1691), and his *Gospel Mysteries Unveil'd* (1701).

The Literal Sense and the Mystical Sense

Keach's work in *Tropologia* was intended to equip readers with an understanding of the "metaphors, allegories, and other tropes and figures of speech" and of the nature of the types in Scripture. From this work we gain much insight into his view of the sense of Scripture. In his sections on the "schemes" or figures in Scripture, he discusses the quotations of the Old Testament (OT) in the New (NT) and the issue of the sense of these passages as intended by the Holy Spirit. He writes, "The sense intended by the Holy Spirit is either literal, or typical and mystical."²¹ Regarding OT prophecies about Christ quoted in the NT, Keach says, "In an immediate literal sense, there are frequently quotations which concern Christ, of whom the prophets prophesied, *κατα το ρητον*, word for word, as Isa. vii. 14."²² Key to understanding Keach on this sort of literal sense is his use of the phrases "immediate" and "*κατα το ρητον*." As will become further clarified when we discuss Keach's notion of the "mystical sense," this literal sense is what the author (here the Spirit through the prophets) referred to directly or

immediately “word for word.” In the cases mentioned in the context where the prophets referred directly to Christ, the passage has an “immediate literal sense.”

This sort of “immediate literal sense” can also be diversely understood given the context of its usage, all while possessing for Keach the fundamental notion of immediacy of reference. Keach can sometimes speak of the “literal sense” as what the normal, proper sense of the words convey. In his later discussion of baptism as a burial, he notes the common agreement of the learned that “the primary, proper, and literal signification of βαπτίζω, *Baptiso*, is, *Mergo, immergo, submerge, obruo, item tingo, quod fit immergendo*.”²³ This is the sense literally or properly taken. Keach also speaks, however, more broadly of the “literal sense” in terms of genre, namely, historical Scriptures. In his *Gospel Mysteries Unveil’d*, Keach rebukes those “who turn literal, plain, or historical Scriptures into allegories.”²⁴ Historical Scriptures stand opposite of the genre of “tropical Scriptures” such as “parables, metaphors, allegories, and similitudes.”²⁵ However, we are not to think that for Keach “tropical” or metaphorical Scriptures are excluded from the category of “literal sense” when considered more broadly as that to which the author referred to immediately or directly according to the scope of the place. This is evidenced in *Tropologia* by the way Keach labels the sense of passages which use metaphorical language as the “literal sense” because they have their immediate, direct referent in Christ. These passages are Amos 9:11 (“In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David, and wall up its breaches; I will also raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old”) and Zechariah 13:7 (“Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, and against the man, My Associate,” declares the LORD of hosts. “Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered; and I will turn my hands against the little ones”).²⁶ Thus, for Keach, the term “literal sense” can be used to refer to 1) the proper, primary signification of words themselves, 2) the nature of the genre of historical Scriptures which primarily use words according to this proper signification, 3) that which is more broadly referred to immediately by the author in his discourse, whether the words be used according to their primary or figurative signification.

This summary brings us to Keach’s view of the mystical sense of Scripture. On the one hand, Keach refers to the hidden spiritual meaning intended by the speaker in parables (which are allegories) as the “mystical sense.”²⁷

On the other hand, Keach also refers to the sense intended by the Spirit in typological passages of Scripture as the “mystical sense.” Regarding this latter usage, Keach states, “The sense intended by the Holy Spirit is either literal, or typical and mystical.” The term “mystical” describes the full sense intended by the Spirit when there is an *immediate* referent the words signify (the type) and a *mediate* referent also signified by the words but indirectly (the antitype).²⁸ Typological passages are called the “mystical sense” because, as Keach states, “a typical sense is when things hidden, or unknown, whether present, or to come, especially when the transactions recorded in the Old Testament prefigure the transactions in the New, are expressed by external action, or prophetic vision.”²⁹ Speaking in the context of the sense intended by the Spirit in those passages of the OT quoted in the NT, Keach explains, “There are citations in a mediate and typical sense out of the Old Testament, respecting Christ and his mystical body the Church: as Exod. xii. 46, about the paschal lamb applied to Christ, John xix. 36; the brazen serpent, Numbers xxi. 8, 9, with John iii. 14, 15; Jonah ii. 1, 10, with Matt. xii. 39, 40; Adam and Eve, Gen ii. 23, 24, with Eph. v. 31, 32.”³⁰ When the Spirit spoke in OT Scriptures of something that was typological, the immediate referent was the type, and this could be described as the literal sense due to this immediacy from the words themselves.³¹ However, the Spirit also intended from the words to speak of the antitype, albeit indirectly or mediately through the type. This is what Keach refers to as the sense which is typical or mystical.

Later on in his work, Keach further expounds what he means in these statements. In his discussion on types, Keach states, “An historical type is the mystical sense of Scripture, whereby things acted or done in the Old Testament ... prefigured and adumbrated things acted in the New Testament times, with respect especially to Christ the Antitype, who is, as it were, the kernel inclosed in all those shells of Old Testament ceremonies, types, or acts, etc.”³² Such types may be expressly pointed out in Scripture either directly or indirectly (an “innate” or “natural” type), or they may be types not specified in the NT but “gathered to be such by interpreters” from the Scripture itself according to “fair probabilities agreeable to the analogy of faith” (“inferred” types). Opposed to these legitimate types are illegitimate types “without any foundation in, or shadow of sense, from the literal sense of the text.” Keach continues, “Of the latter sort, are the wild

fantastical conceits of papists, and some others, who make types where there are none.”³³

The correct interpretation of types is a significant concern for Keach, seen in his provision of nine canons by which to properly interpret and understand types in Scripture. His sixth canon is helpful for our purposes. It states, “In expounding the types of the Old Testament, we are to examine accurately, whether the shadow, or the truth, represented by a shadow, be proposed; that is, whether the prophets prophesy of Christ under the umbrage or shadow of types, or in express terms, viz., speaking of our Savior in a literal sense.” Keach argues that we need to discern between when the OT prophets speak of Christ directly in “express terms,” in other words, “κατὰ τὸ ρητόν,”³⁴ and when they speak of Christ in terms of the type which shadowed him forth. In the former case, this would be according to a literal sense, since Christ would be spoken of immediately or directly apart from the figuring role of the type. In the latter case, Christ would be truly spoken of and intended, yet it would be so mediately through the representation of the type.³⁵ Keach’s statements here and in places seen above, however, about the intended manner of the Spirit’s/the prophets’ speaking must be investigated to understand the relationship between this literal sense and the mystical sense.

The Unity of Meaning: A Single Sense

To interpret Keach in the places we have seen as advocating for a multiplicity of meanings in the text of Scripture would be a fundamental misunderstanding. This would be to misconstrue his own usage of categories and to fail to put Keach in historical and theological context. In this section I will examine Keach’s view of the single sense of Scripture, and in the next, I will compare Keach to some of his Reformed contemporaries.

The first and clearest place to discern Keach’s broadest notion of the sense of Scripture is in the 2nd London Confession, the republication of which in 1689 was partly spear-headed by Benjamin Keach. His name appears in the prefix to the 1689 edition as one of the pastors approving and presenting the confession of the Baptist faith.³⁶ Section 1.9 of the Confession states, “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture it self: And therefore when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold but one) it must be searched by other

places that speak more clearly.”³⁷ Here we have Keach’s affirmation that the “true and full sense of Scripture” is “not manifold” (as in the quadriga) “but one.”

This principle of the singularity of Scripture’s sense or meaning in any place is naturally evidenced in Keach’s own writings. In Keach’s thought, the key to this unity of sense is the intention of the Spirit. As we saw in Keach’s statement above, “The sense [singular] intended by the Holy Spirit, is either literal, or typical and mystical.”³⁸ In his sixth canon on typology which calls for distinguishing direct and typological prophecies of Christ, Keach states the following:

The reason depends upon the custom of prophetical speech, yea, of God himself, speaking by the prophets, by which they are wont to make a sudden transition from the type to the antitype, from a corporeal to a spiritual thing; and when the speech is of another thing, to turn themselves to Christ, the kernel, as it were, of the scripture, and prophecy of him, not under the shadow of types, but in express terms.³⁹

Despite the distinction between immediacy and mediacy of the prophetic reference to Christ in the OT, Keach views both kinds of discourse as one in sense or meaning whenever they occur because they are both grounded in God’s intention through the prophetic authors.

Keach distinguishes properly interpreted types from bad, “extorted” types, “without any foundation in, or shadow of sense, from the literal sense of the text.”⁴⁰ A proposed type is not a valid type unless the literal, immediate sense indicates it is such. Therefore, the mystical sense in which Christ is seen in the type is not truly separate from this literal sense, because the literal sense itself is not understood if the mystical sense is not seen in the letter. The sense considered as a whole is one, and the use of the phrases “literal” and “mystical” describe two aspects of the one sense.⁴¹

This unity of sense grounded in divine intention is also evident in Keach’s comments in *Gospel Mysteries Unveil’d*, in which he states the following:

And whereas Types in the Old Testament respect only some Persons or Things, (as I said before) and their Antitypes; so they are such Persons and Things, which none but whom God himself made use of as Types; Men are not to frame,

or make Types, nor ought any to attempt once so to do; for after that rate Men may turn all Historical Scriptures into Allegories, as some will have Pharaoh a Type of the Devil. I am satisfied that all Persons and Things that were Types under the Old Testament, God hath somewhere or another given us Grounds to believe, that they were Types or Figurative.⁴²

For Keach, the types (the mystical sense) are only established by God who designed and intended them and are evident in the text of Scripture itself.

The same principle of intention applies to “Tropical Scriptures” (i.e., “Parables, Metaphors, Allegories, and Similitudes”).⁴³ “Therefore,” Keach states, “in [Jesus’] Parables, if we would understand the Mind of God in them, we must always take Care to consider the main Design and Scope of them; or which the Sacred Story tends, or what our Lord chiefly designeth therein.”⁴⁴ The mind of God in the parable is understood if we attend to what Christ intended to communicate in the parable. For example, in the “To the Reader” section of *The Counterfeit Christian*, Keach discusses a possible interpretation of the parable in Matthew 12:43–45 which he expounds in the book. Stating his differing opinion, he says the following: “yet I do not believe the Lord Jesus intends to shew hereby they do all after that manner fall from their ... Religion and Profession: Tis evident to me, he applies it to the Pharisees ... If the Scope of the ... be considered, That our blessed Savior designed by this Parable to see ... the State of the Pharisees.”⁴⁵ Despite the fact that some words on this page of the edition used here of *The Counterfeit Christian* are sometimes illegible, Keach’s point is clear. Even of Scriptures which are parabolic and allegorical in genre, proper interpretation is determined by the text itself, according to the design and scope of the author. Parabolic, figurative, or allegorical Scriptures do not possess a multiplicity of distinct meanings, but they have a unified, singular sense based on the intention of the author/speaker, even if this sense be compound or mystical.⁴⁶

This point that allegories, parables, and similitudes do not multiply the sense of Scripture is further evidenced in Keach’s “The Epistle to the Reader” affixed to *Tropologia*. After giving a helpful list of distinctions between types and allegories, Keach provides a set of guidelines for identifying and interpreting allegories. First, Keach writes that “there is a great difference betwixt an *Allegorick* Exposition of Scripture, and an Exposition

of *Allegorick* Scripture.” He goes on to say that the “first is that which the Fathers and School-men fail in, *i.e.* when they allegorize plain Scriptures and Histories, seeking to draw out some secret meaning, other than appears in the Words, and so would fasten many Senses upon one Scripture.” This practice he denounces saying, “This is indeed unsafe, and is justly reprobable; for this makes clear Scripture dark, and obtrudes Meanings on the Words never intended by the Spirit.” Thus, the authority and perspicuity of Scripture is jeopardized by this practice of “fastening many Senses upon one Scripture.”⁴⁷

In contrast to this interpretive violence, Keach says, “An Exposition of *Allegorical* Scripture is the opening and expounding of some dark Scripture (wherein the Mind of the Spirit is couched and hid under Figures, etc.) making it plain and edifying, by bringing out the Sense according to the meaning of the Holy Spirit in the place, tho at first it seems to bear no such thing.” The example he gives of this sort of exposition of allegorical Scripture is Jesus’ own interpretation of his parable (an allegory) in Matthew 13 concerning the sower and the seed.⁴⁸ There is one sense of even allegorical Scriptures, namely, the sense intended by the Spirit.

To summarize, Keach believed that the *one sense* of any Scripture could be either literal or mystical. For Keach, the term “literal” could refer to different realities seen in the text of Scripture. It could refer to 1) the proper, primary signification of words themselves, 2) the nature of the genre of historical Scriptures which primarily use words according to this proper signification, 3) that which is more broadly referred to immediately by the author in his discourse, whether the words be used according to their primary or figurative signification. When the Spirit through the prophets intended a typological correspondence in Scripture, the antitype seen under the Gospel is the “mystical sense.” For Keach this term can also apply to the spiritual meaning of parables whose intended meaning does not lie on the surface. As seen in light of Keach’s writings and the 2nd London Baptist Confession, however, when these elements of literal and mystical are present, they not constitute properly separate senses, but elements of one and the same sense intended by the Holy Spirit.

Keach does not, however, appear to name this one sense intended by the Holy Spirit. His writings in the *Tropologia* are focused on particular uses of Scriptural words and the nature of types and metaphors and do not provide

in one place a thoroughgoing, systematized consideration of the sense of Scripture. The next section will consider the relevant work of Francis Turretin on the literal sense to show Keach’s hermeneutical continuity within the Reformed tradition. In doing so, it will suggest what Keach likely would have termed the one sense of Scripture of which the 2nd London Baptist Confession speaks.

COMPARING BENJAMIN KEACH AND FRANCIS TURRETIN

Widely known as a masterful synthesizer of the Reformed Scholastic era, Francis Turretin (1623–87) serves as an excellent point of comparison to judge the continuity of Keach’s hermeneutic with that of the broader Reformed tradition. In comparing Keach to Turretin, I do not intend to pass over those closer to Keach in his social, religious, and political context. Rather, the point in this comparison is to show the points of continuity with Keach’s understanding of the sense of Scripture with what was the consensus amongst Reformed Orthodox on this topic, and Turretin is an excellent representative and articulator of this consensus.⁴⁹

Given the significant debate between the Reformed (with Protestants generally) and Roman Catholics regarding the authority of Scripture, Turretin in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* reserves a whole topic to the question “Whether the Scriptures have a fourfold sense: literal, allegorical, anagogical, and tropological. We deny against the papists.”⁵⁰ After stating the position of the Roman Church, Turretin asserts that “only one true and genuine sense belongs to the Scriptures. That sense may be twofold: either simple or compound.”⁵¹ He goes on to state that a simple or historical literal sense “contains the declaration of one thing without any other signification.” This sort of simple literal sense is seen in doctrinal Scriptures (i.e., epistles) and the non-typological histories of Scripture. This simple literal sense can be proper, when the words carry normal signification, or it can be figurative, when the words are used figuratively or metaphorically. Turretin continues, “The composite or mixed sense is in prophecies as types, part of which is in the type, part in the antitype.” To avoid any confusion, Turretin explains “This does not establish two senses, but two parts of one and the same sense intended by the Holy Spirit, who with the letter considers the mystery.”⁵²

When the true and genuine sense is compound or composite, the “literal sense is sometimes taken more widely for the whole compass of the sense intended by the Holy Spirit (whether in type or antitype) and so contains within it the mystical sense [i.e., the antitype fully revealed in Christ].” He then explains the terminology sometimes employed for this compound literal sense by stating that the term “literal sense” can be “taken more strictly for that which the words immediately and proximately afford and so is distinguished from the mystical (which is signified not so much by the words as by the things which the words signify), which arises only mediately from the intention of the speaker.”⁵³ Thus, when the sense or meaning is compound, the full literal sense intended by the Holy Spirit is composed of both a more narrowly construed literal sense (the type the words immediately refer to; e.g., the paschal lamb of Ex. 12:46) and the mystical sense (what the type refers to by virtue of “the intention of the speaker”; e.g., Christ the unblemished lamb).⁵⁴

The correspondence between Keach’s and Turretin’s construal of the sense of Scripture is striking in one way, though in another way not surprising given that this construal was commonplace amongst the Reformed and Reformed Orthodox.⁵⁵ Both men operate with the same categories regarding the literal sense—a term which can be understood in one of the three following ways: (1) the proper, primary signification of words themselves, (2) the nature of the genre of historical Scriptures which primarily use words according to this proper signification, (3) that which is more broadly referred to immediately by the author in his discourse, whether the words be used according to their primary or figurative signification. For both theologians, the antitype revealed in Christ is described as the “mystical sense.” Further, both insist that there is *only one sense* intended in any place by the Holy Spirit and, thus, that this “literal sense” and “mystical sense” constitute *one compound meaning*. For these theologians, one cannot truly understand the type or the thing immediately signified by the words without also understanding the antitype or the thing mediately signified by the words, because they together form one meaning intended by the Spirit.

The one thing that Turretin fills in which is left unnamed by Keach is the name of the single sense intended by the Holy Spirit, namely, the “[compound] literal sense.” Turretin makes clear that “the whole compass of the sense intended by the Holy Spirit (whether in type or antitype)” can be

called the "literal sense."⁵⁶ Given the prominence of this term amongst the Reformed to describe this unified sense intended by the Spirit, it is likely that this would be the term assumed by Keach for this sense as well.⁵⁷

Another element key to this discussion which does not appear to be addressed explicitly by Keach is the nature of the relationship between divine and human authorial intent in the production of this one literal sense. Keach, along with Turretin, refer frequently to the compound literal sense being intended by the Spirit.⁵⁸ This wording is significant, because it reflects the common way the Reformed and Reformed Orthodox understood divine and human authorial intent in the Old Testament to be related. Though the prophets wrote with Christ and his salvation as their ultimate referent, sometimes they did not completely understand the mysteries and shadows inherent to the meaning of their own writings. But the Spirit of God bearing them along did, and the coming of the Son pulled back the veil from the shadows and mysteries of the OT.

This common belief amongst the Reformed and Reformed Orthodox may be seen in the writings of John Calvin (1509–1564), the works of whom Keach regularly cited in his own writings.⁵⁹ In his commentary on Daniel 12:8, Calvin writes that Daniel "could not attain unto the meaning of these predictions, which were so extremely obscure, and this was needful to their full and thorough comprehension."⁶⁰ Elsewhere commenting on Romans 16:25–26, Calvin correlates 1 Peter 1:12 with this passage saying that when the OT authors were given their message from the Lord, "God was at that time silent, though he spoke; for he held in suspense the revelation of those things concerning which he designed that his servants should prophecy."⁶¹ The OT authors did indeed bear witness to Christ, but they did so in terms of shadows and types, consciously searching for and awaiting their unveiling (1 Peter 1:10–12). Calvin continues, "For although the Prophets formerly taught all those things which have been explained by Christ and his Apostles, yet they taught them with so much obscurity, that in comparison with the clear brightness of the gospel light, it is no wonder that those things are said to have been hidden which are now made manifest."⁶² But, when the revelation of God's mystery came in Christ, "then only," Calvin asserts, "were opened the treasures of celestial wisdom when God appeared to his ancient people through his only-begotten Son, as it were face to face, all shadows having been done away."⁶³ Thus, Calvin affirms that the

human authors knowingly testified of the Christ to come, but they did so with a degree of obscurity, awaiting when the Spirit's intent would be made clear by the unveiling of the mysteries and the dispelling of the shadows.

The same idea is articulated by John Owen (1616–1683), who was Keach's most frequently cited source.⁶⁴ In his magisterial work *Pneumatologia*, Owen writes the following which is worth quoting in full:

[The Holy Ghost] did not, indeed, so enlighten and raise [the prophetic authors'] minds as to give them a distinct understanding and full comprehension of all the things themselves that were declared unto them; there was more in their inspirations than they could search to the bottom of. Hence, although the prophets under the Old Testament were made use of to communicate the clearest revelations and predictions concerning Jesus Christ, yet in the knowledge and understanding of the *meaning* of them they were all inferior to John Baptist, as he was in this matter to the meanest believer, or "least in the kingdom of heaven." Therefore, for their own illumination and edification did they diligently inquire, by the ordinary means of prayer and meditation, into *the meaning of the Spirit of God* in those prophecies which themselves received by extraordinary revelation, 1 Pet. i. 10, 11.⁶⁵

Thus, for Owen, we see that the human authors knowingly bore witness to Christ but could not understand the full meaning of their own words, testifying as they did to mysteries concerning Jesus Christ. But they did search diligently into "*the meaning of the Spirit of God* in those prophecies which themselves received by extraordinary revelation."⁶⁶

With this theological context provided, when the one meaning of Scripture possessed a mystical sense, it is the Spirit's intent that we are truly seeking for, as Keach and Turretin state, because the human authors only partially understood these mysteries. None of the authors above viewed this reality as created different, indeterminate, or manifold senses of a Scriptural text. Rather the unity of the single sense was preserved by the fundamental unity involved in the relation between the intention of the prophet who sometimes testified dimly to future realities and the intention of the Spirit who with the shadow spoke of the mystery in fullness.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that Benjamin Keach's beliefs on the meaning or sense of Scripture are entirely consonant with the broader Reformed tradition on Scripture's one sense. This was demonstrated through examining key works in which Keach discusses the literal sense of Scripture as well as the mystical sense of Scripture. As was shown above, these elements were, on the one hand, distinguished, but never separated so as to constitute two different meanings. Turretin, who represents the mainstream of the Reformed tradition on this matter, presents the sense of Scripture in a conceptuality identical to Keach's. Both were united in the Protestant concern that God's voice be clearly heard in Scripture, which is the sole ultimate authority and itself the only infallible rule of interpreting Scripture.

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- ¹ Quote taken from *Tropologia; A Key to Open Scripture Metaphors, in Four Books*. (London, City Press, 1858), ix. Picture of Benjamin Keach taken from Benjamin Keach, *Gospel Mysteries Unveil'd* (London, R. Tookey, 1701).
 - ² Thomas Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists* (London, Printed for the Author and sold by... Aaron Ward, 1740), 2:202.
 - ³ See the title page of the London Confession of 1644. The title page reads as follows (I have modified the capitalization) “The Confession of Faith, of those Churches which are commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptists; Presented to the view of all that feared God, to be examined by the touchstone of the Word of Truth: As likewise for the taking off those aspersions which are frequently both in Pulpit and Print, (although unjustly) cast upon them,” *The Confession of Faith*, (London, 1644). See the Confession's preface, “To all Christian Readers” for the development of this idea.
 - ⁴ Austin Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach* (Dundas, ON: Joshua Press, 2004), 39. Benjamin was the sixth of seven children.
 - ⁵ Thomas Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists* (London, 1740), 4:269.
 - ⁶ Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists*, 4:269.
 - ⁷ David A. Copeland, *Benjamin Keach and the Development of Baptist Traditions in Seventeenth-Century England*, *Studies in Religion and Society*, vol. 48 (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 15.
 - ⁸ Thomas J. Nettles, *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2005), 1:163.
 - ⁹ For a further concise account of this narrative in addition to another occasion of persecution wherein Keach was nearly killed, see Michael A. G. Haykin, *Kiffen, Knollys, and Keach: Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage* (Petersborough, Canada: H&E Publishing, 2019), 142–44.
 - ¹⁰ Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists*, 4:271.
 - ¹¹ Haykin, *Kiffen, Knollys, and Keach*, 144.
 - ¹² Haykin, *Kiffen, Knollys, and Keach*, 145.
 - ¹³ Copeland, *Benjamin Keach and the Development of Baptist Traditions in Seventeenth-Century England*, 13.
 - ¹⁴ Haykin, *Kiffen, Knollys, and Keach*, 145–61.
 - ¹⁵ For more on these and other controversies as well as elements of Keach's doctrine, see Haykin, *Kiffen, Knollys, and Keach*, 146–61; Copeland, *Benjamin Keach and the Development of Baptist Traditions in Seventeenth-Century England*, 17–69; Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:166–88.
 - ¹⁶ Copeland, *Benjamin Keach and the Development of Baptist Traditions in Seventeenth-Century England*, 17.
 - ¹⁷ Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:163.
 - ¹⁸ Benjamin Keach and Thomas Delaune, *Tropologia, or, a key to open Scripture Metaphors* (London: John Richardson and John Darby for Enoch Prosser, 1681), Bk. II: sig. A3r.

- 19 For a source which gives excellent historico-political and theological context to Keach as a theologian within the Reformed and Dissenting contexts, see Jonathan W. Arnold, *The Reformed Theology of Benjamin Keach (1640–1704)*, Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Studies, 11, (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2013). See also the work of D. B. Riker, *A Catholic Reformed Theologian: Federalism and Baptism in the Thought of Benjamin Keach, 1640–1704*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 35 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009). On the relation of Keach's understanding of how the literal sense of Scripture related to millenarian eschatology, see Arnold, *The Reformed Theology of Benjamin Keach*, 207–208.
- 20 *Tropologia* was not only authored by Keach but also by the Irish Baptist Thomas Delaune. Delaune translated the work of Salomon Glassius's *Philologia Sacra* which was included in the *Tropologia*. On this, see James Barry Vaughn, "Public Worship and Practical Theology in the Work of Benjamin Keach (1640–1704)" (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, 1989), 92–93. Due to its massive size, *Tropologia* was published in two volumes originally, with the first volume (1681) containing books I–III. Book I included the first part of the translation of *Philologia Sacra*. The second volume (1682) contained book IV and the second part of *Philologia Sacra*. For this information see Walker, *The Excellent Benjamin Keach*, 188–89; James Christopher Holmes, "The Role of Metaphor in the Sermons of Benjamin Keach, 1640–1704," (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 86–89. For more information on the general background of *Tropologia* see Holmes, "The Role of Metaphor in the Sermons of Benjamin Keach," 82–93. The version of *Tropologia* from which I will cite unless otherwise indicated is *Tropologia; A Key to Open Scripture Metaphors, in Four Books*. (London, City Press, 1858). Cf. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (PRRD), 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 2:453, n.44.
- 21 Keach, *Tropologia*, 217. One must be careful not to anachronistically read into this use of "mystical" ideas of mysticism. Nothing could be further from Keach's intent or the intent of the rest of the Reformed Orthodox when they routinely use this term. See below for the explication of what was meant by this term.
- 22 Keach, *Tropologia*, 217. I have not modified Keach's spelling and I have kept the Greek text as presented in the source. Keach goes on to list a paragraph full of citations of the OT in the NT in which the OT speaks directly (immediately) about Christ.
- 23 Keach, *Tropologia*, 629.
- 24 Keach, *Gospel Mysteries Unveil'd*, bk.1:7.
- 25 Keach, *Gospel Mysteries Unveil'd*, bk.1:2. "Tropical" or "metaphorical" can be used by Keach to describe the use of particular words as well as the use of genre. See *Tropologia*, 629–30.
- 26 Keach, *Tropologia*, 217–218. For Keach's summary of how to distinguish when a text's words are to be understood properly and literally versus when they are to be understood figuratively and parabolically, see *Gospel Mysteries Unveil'd*, bk. 1:4.
- 27 Keach, *Gospel Mysteries Unveil'd*, bk. 1:18, 35, 58, 216; bk. 2:235; bk. 3:119.
- 28 Keach, *Tropologia*, 217–218.
- 29 Keach, *Tropologia*, 228.
- 30 Keach *Tropologia*, 218. The text incorrectly cites "Matt. xii. 39, 40" when it should be Matt. 12:39, 40.
- 31 Keach, *Tropologia*, 232.
- 32 Keach, *Tropologia*, 231.
- 33 Keach, *Tropologia*, 232. The example Keach gives is from a Roman Catholic theologian who "makes the Son of David, yea, Christ himself, a type of the pope of Rome," citing 2 Sam 7:13 as typifying the supremacy and kingdom of the pope (232).
- 34 Keach, *Tropologia*, 217.
- 35 For Keach, this literal-mystical dynamic applies to other types in Scripture such as literal and mystical Babylon. See *Tropologia*, 862–93. See esp. 882, 886.
- 36 See William L. Lumpkin and Bill J. Leonard, eds., *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd rev. ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011), 216–22.
- 37 *A Confession of Faith Put forth by the Elders and Brethren Of many Congregations of Christians (baptized upon Profession of their Faith) in London and the Country*, (London, 1677), 8. I am using the 1677 edition since it is the same in content to that which was republished in 1688 and the years following.
- 38 Keach, *Tropologia*, 217.
- 39 Keach, *Tropologia*, 235.
- 40 Keach, *Tropologia*, 232.

- ⁴¹ Toward the end of *Tropologia*, Keach gives several examples of the types of the OT and their relation to Christ, the antitype (972–96). We are not, however, to see these mystical fulfillments in Christ as different spiritual senses not essential in unity with the literal type. Earlier in his work, Keach makes clear the unified nature of the meaning of mystical passages of Scripture where the type signifies the antitype. Also, in this section when speaking of David’s referent in the Psalms, Keach states, “Many things that David speaks in the book of psalms, which some are ready to think he spake to himself, yet, such a type was he of Christ, that they are directly applicable to none but Jesus Christ, &c.” (978). Once again, we see intention of the speaker grounding Keach’s view on the unity of sense.
- ⁴² Keach, *Gospel Mysteries Unveild*, bk. 1:2.
- ⁴³ In *Gospel Mysteries Unveild*, bk. 1:1–2, Keach presents several distinctions between types and tropical Scriptures. Space will not allow for a full discussion of his distinctively Reformed approach here.
- ⁴⁴ Keach, *Gospel Mysteries Unveild*, bk. 1:3. He also states, “Moreover, the main Scope or Design of a Parable, is commonly to be understood, either from our Savior’s more general or more particular Exposition of it, or else from his main and principal Design, which may be gathered from the Preface to it, or else from the Conclusion thereof” (3, cf. 58).
- ⁴⁵ Keach, *The Counterfeit Christian, or The Danger of Hypocrisy* (Southwark, 1691). A.2, [3].
- ⁴⁶ E.g., *Gospel Mysteries Unveild*, bk. 1:58.
- ⁴⁷ Keach, “The Epistle to the Reader,” in *Tropologia* (1681), A. 6.
- ⁴⁸ Keach, “The Epistle to the Reader,” in *Tropologia* (1681), A. 6. Even where some today may think Keach over-read the parables or allegories of Christ (as some did in his own day), Keach saw himself as staying within the scope of the Jesus’s intended meaning in his expositions of the parables. See his “To the Impartial Reader” in *Gospel Mysteries Unveild*, A–A2v. See also p.3 of the work itself.
- ⁴⁹ Compare the following exposition of Turretin’s thought with Muller’s summary of the Reformed Orthodox view of the sense of Scripture in Muller, *PRRD*, 2:469–502.
- ⁵⁰ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave, (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1994), 1:149. The following section on Turretin has been adapted with permission from Knox Brown and Michael Pereira, “Seeing Christ in the Letter: A Review of Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*,” Christ Over All, last modified October 31, 2025, <https://christoverall.com/article/concise/seeing-christ-in-the-letter-a-review-of-kevin-j-vanhoozers-mere-christian-hermeneutics/>.
- ⁵¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:150.
- ⁵² Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:150.
- ⁵³ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:151.
- ⁵⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:150.
- ⁵⁵ See Muller, *PRRD*, 2:469–502.
- ⁵⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:150.
- ⁵⁷ For more on the notion of the “literal sense” and its usage and meaning in the Reformed and Post-Reformed Orthodox era, see Muller, *PRRD*, 2:469–502.
- ⁵⁸ E.g., Keach, *Tropologia*, 217; Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:149, 150, 151, 152.
- ⁵⁹ See Arnold, *The Reformed Theology of Benjamin Keach*, 45.
- ⁶⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Daniel*, transl. Thomas Myers (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1853), 2:385.
- ⁶¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, transl. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 2:555.
- ⁶² Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 2:555.
- ⁶³ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 2:556.
- ⁶⁴ Arnold, *The Reformed Theology of Benjamin Keach*, 40.
- ⁶⁵ John Owen, *IINEMATOAOTIA*, vol. 3 *The Works of John Owen*, ed. by William H. Goold, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 132, emphasis added.
- ⁶⁶ Owen, *Works*, 3:132, emphasis added.