John Smyth: Root of the Baptists

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by James M. Hill

John Smyth was one of the founders of the Baptist church movement as a whole and was the impetus for the later founding of the General Baptists under his protégé Thomas Helwys. Smyth also made major contributions to later Baptist denominations and influenced the founding of America through colonies fleeing religious oppression in Europe. Tull put John Smyth's name foremost in his book on the major influencers of Baptist thought. He said, "John Smyth's life was profoundly influenced by the tortuous course of the English Reformation. Smyth, in turn, was a leader in one stream of that Reformation which flowed through Puritanism and Separatism to the beginnings of Baptist life."[1]

Many events occurred in England leading up to John Smyth's birth sometime around 1570.[2] Henry VIII reigned from 1509-1547 and had separated with the Roman Catholic Church but wanted "popery but not a pope." Henry's oppressive laws such as the *Act of Six Articles* of 1539 forced many English Christians into exile. In Switzerland during 1525, the Swiss Anabaptists broke with Zwingli, and Menno Simmons became the leader of the Dutch enclave in 1537. In 1538 Henry VIII made efforts to expel all of the Anabaptists from England.[3] Many English refugees were able to return when Edward VI came into power in 1547, and they returned with a wide variety of ecclesiastical influences from the Reformers. Many reforms were made in the Church of England during this era likely as a result of these reformational ideas of the returnees. These included the destruction of shrines and idols, allowance of priests to marry, and important revisions to the *Book of Common Prayer*. Another exodus came about when "Bloody Mary" came to the throne in 1553, with many exiles going to the very same areas to which they had fled to under Henry VIII. Once Elizabeth came to power in 1558, many exiles returned marking the beginning of the Puritan movement. Elizabeth made some much needed reforms but also instituted ecclesiastical strictures such as mandatory church attendance and the requirement that all clergy swear to a shortened version of the Articles of Religion.[4]

John Smyth received an MA from Cambridge in 1593 and was ordained by the Church of England in 1594.[5] He worked either as a lecturer or preacher for the city of Lincoln beginning in 1600 but was removed from this official positon in 1602. Torbet quoted John Shakespeare in stating the reason for Smyth's removal as having "approved himself a factious man in this city by personal preaching, and that untruly against divers men of good place."[6] He joined a Separatist church in Gainsborough beginning in 1606 until he moved to Holland in 1608.[7] At some point he became their pastor.[8] This was an interesting turn of events since during his time with the Church of England, Smyth defended the Church against the Separatists. Later he began to have doubts about the teachings of the Church and spent some nine months investigating before he joined the very people which he had formerly opposed.[9] This is a pattern that repeated in Smyth's life. At first he objected to the Separatist teachings, then embraced them. Later he did the same with the Puritans, and embraced these. Finally he synthesized all of his beliefs into yet a third category which could be called Baptist while embracing Arminianism, a doctrine he formerly opposed.

Smyth moved his congregation to Amsterdam after incurring the wrath of the English government. At this point some historians say that Smyth baptized himself,[10] something that he indicated later that he regretted.[11] There is much question over whether or not this event actually happened, and the importance of the debacle. Christian said, "It is difficult to see what difference it makes whether Smyth baptized himself or was baptized by Helwys."[12] Benedict quoted Crosby and Ivimey and said that most likely the story was false. More likely what happened was that one of Smyth's companions baptized him.[13] Perhaps some of the confusion in the historical accounts is because there are at least three men with the same name during the era.[14] Regardless what happened, Smyth's legacy contained in the various historical accounts is tainted by the possibility of his self-baptism. If Smyth didn't do what was reported it's hard to understand why he would later indicate remorse for it.

Sometime around 1609 in Amsterdam Mr. Smyth was excluded from his own congregation and his protégé Thomas Helwys became their pastor. Near the same time Smyth had petitioned the Mennonite Church for membership but was rejected.[15] The split seems to have come about because about ten members of the church didn't agree, including Helwys, who in effect formed a new church.[16] Smyth never was accepted into the Mennonite fellowship since he died of consumption in August, 1612 and was buried in Amsterdam.[17] In that same year, Helwys returned to England and together with many of his small congregation from Amsterdam. Once there, Pastor Helwys formed the first Baptist church in England. [18] The remainder of Helwys' church in Amsterdam wasn't accepted into fellowship with the Waterlander Mennonites until some three years after Smyth's death in 1615.[19]

John Smyth's theological beliefs followed three distinct patterns that progressed chronologically from his birth in England to his death in Amsterdam. The first phase was a time when he followed Puritan teachings. This was followed by a period when he was most closely identified with the English Separatists.[20] The final chapter of his life could be called his Baptist phase during which he embraced Arminianism towards the close of his life. In his early life it appears that Mr. Smyth's

beliefs were similar to the other Separatists around him. When he left England for Amsterdam he did it under the fellowship of a church under the authority of a Mr. Ainsworth and consisting of the co-pastors of a neighboring church, Mr. Robinson and Mr. Clifton. After they arrived in Amsterdam, they were unified in doctrine. Then Mr. Smyth began a doctrinal study and came to the conclusion that neither infant baptism or sprinkling were confirmed by Scripture. This caused a conflict within his church and he was thrown out.[21] At this point Smyth formed a separate church in 1607 or 1608 almost wholly composed of English exiles. Smyth was evidently a strong believer in the Anabaptist doctrine of believers' baptism. In 1608 Smyth, following the Dutch Anabaptists, concluded that members should be added to church fellowship through a profession of faith and subsequent baptism and therefore rejected infant baptism.[22] Smyth continued his doctrinal studies and produced about a dozen works during his lifetime.[23]

The Puritans were the foundation stone for the development of John Smyth's theological beliefs. This group came onto the radar screen during the reign of Queen Elizabeth and brought with it several distinctives that later found their way into the Baptists. First was their conviction that the church consist only of born again believers through the power of the Holy Spirit. Second, they believed that the entire realm of Christian practice should be conducted strictly according to the word of God in the Bible. Third, the Puritans were primarily Calvinistic in their reading of the Scripture and presbyterian in their ecclesiology as it related to the order of church versus state. They believed that the king had supreme power over civil matters but was also under obligation to enforce order and worship in the church and to the extent that everyone in the society be a member. [24]

Smyth wrote two volumes during his Puritan phase. They represented some remarkable beliefs for the age, things which are directly reflected in the modern Baptist church in America today. He believed that the Lord 's Prayer was given to us by our Lord as a "model prayer" rather than one to be recited by rote repetition.[25] He spoke against the Roman Church's use of the prayer and strived for what he called "true and holy use" of it.[26]

The second building block of Smyth's theology was English Separatism. This small movement also came about during the time of Queen Elizabeth in response to the general idea that reforms were impossible inside the Church of England. One of the rallying cries of the Separatists, who likely numbered less than 1,000 people, was the same as the Puritans who believed the church should not contain a mixed multitude of saints with the wicked. The Separatists believed that they should expel from membership anyone that it deemed to be unconverted. Separatists shared the Puritan belief that the true church should be enforced by the civil authorities, even though they called Jesus Christ their prophet and king.[27]

Smyth wrote three volumes during his Separatist period that began around the time he left England. In these, he indicated that the church was both visible and invisible with the latter consisting, in Calvinistic terms, of only the elect. Smyth defined the visible church in strict terms such that it consisted only of true saints, the Holy Spirit dwelling within believers uniting church members to their head Jesus Christ, and something that he called "true properties." Within his "true properties" was a threefold process for appointing church leaders. This consisted of a popular election of them within the church, an examination of the candidate to see that they met the proper qualifications, and finally an ordination or laying on of hands in appointing the person to service.[28] This very thorough method of examining candidates to determine if they were truly spiritual undoubtedly influenced the later Baptist movement that followed similar prescriptions.

During this time, Smyth sought to keep purity in the church and did not allow donations by nonmembers. He spoke about the duty of the entire church to maintain its purity by excommunication "not (for) the destruction of the offender, but the mortification of his synne, and the salvation of his soule."[29] Smyth exalted Scripture and believed that the most important aspect of local church government was for it to be true to the constitution of the church as uncovered in the NT. In this view, he found no justification for multiplicity of church offices described by the terms bishop, elder, or presbyter, as these were all the same thing with different names. The only other office he found in the NT was that of a deacon who were charged with performing acts of service.

[30] He believed that Scripture should be translated directly by the minister for the congregation and that this should be done in such a way as not to interfere with the Holy Spirit.[31] Smyth believed that an apostate church was marked by what he called a "mixed membership" of believers and nonbelievers alongside each other. He said this in spite of the fact that he believed there were true believers in the various false churches, but that they should depart from them. His test for membership in the true church was obedience to Christ shown in obedience to his commands in what he called an "outward visible faith." Because of these things and for other reasons he called the Church of England an apostate church. Out of this belief sprung his statement that if the Church was false, then so was its baptism.[32] Worship during his Separatist phase was what we would call charismatic. Smyth spoke against putting bounds on the Holy Spirit, which he said must be "at liberty," and that rote forms of worship were "quenching the Spirit."[33] Some of these beliefs most certainly found their way into the modern Baptist church, especially the limited church government of elders with deacons as "doers." This structure in defiance of the Anglican and Roman Churches is taken for granted in the modern Baptist church.

The third and final period of Smyth's life could be called Baptist or Anabaptist and began around 1609. This was marked by his rejection of infant baptism and a belief that church members were to be initiated into the church by repentance and profession of faith followed by baptism.[34] During this period, Smyth wrote against the Separatists in similar way in which he spoke against the mainline church. In fact, he called them harlots in that they shared with Rome the "mark of the beast" of infant baptism. The Anglicans justified the practice by saying it was a confirmation of the New Covenant in the same way that circumcision was the sealing of the Abraham's. Smyth broke new ground here by finding two covenants with Abraham, that of his "carnal seed" and "spiritual seed." He said the spiritual seed must first believe and be sealed with the Holy Spirit, then be baptized under their own free will. His prescription was clear that baptism was not effectual in doing anything except in that it made a visible declaration the promises of the Holy Spirit. The person that came forward for baptism, "must bee one that confesseth his faith & his sinnes, one that is regenerate & borne again." [35] Smyth seems to have been influenced by the Waterlander

Mennonites during this time with their Anabaptist beliefs at least in part because his congregation worshiped in buildings owned by a merchant that was a Mennonite.[36] These revolutionary ideas, borrowed and modified from the Mennonites, found their way into the modern Baptist church with the exception of the idea of the dual seed. The seed concept passed into other modern churches.

When Smyth was accused of siding with the Anabaptists, he stated that the baptism he was teaching was the only true baptism, and implied that the Anabaptists did the ceremony for the purpose of being rebaptized rather than for the principles that he outlined in terms of believer's baptism.[37] At some point after this, he came to the belief that "private baptism was an error and that the Amsterdam Mennonites constituted the true church and had a true baptism." Then he confessed that he acted too quickly in baptizing himself.[38] In 1610 Smyth contacted the Dutch Mennonites by writing a letter in which he confessed his error in baptizing himself and requested membership in their church. After this a conflict arouse amongst Smyth's congregation and a group led by Thomas Helwys split from Smyth. Helwys went as far as to draw up a document outlining his group's beliefs and present it to the Mennonites such that they wouldn't confuse him with Smyth's sect. Eventually Helwys' group returned to England sometime around 1611 or 1612. The Mennonites were cautious about Smyth and requested a detailed doctrinal statement, so Smyth produced two documents. The first was a compilation of twenty articles of faith, and the second was a document of one hundred articles called *The Last Book of John Smyth Called the Retraction of His Errors*. Torbet says that these two documents were some of the earliest English Baptist Creeds, but none of them contained any mention of baptism by immersion.[39]

Smyth's final years were marked by more doctrinal changes. In his early writings he was a confirmed Calvinist, although later on he apparently adopted Arminianism.[40] Since Smyth came to embrace a general atonement of Christ's death for all men, in his later years his group came to be called "General Baptists," a name carried forward by Helwys.[41] The "Particular" Baptists didn't come into the picture in England until around 1638 under the influence of non-Separatists such as Henry Jacob, John Lathrop, and Praise-God Barebone.[42] Tull noted that earlier Smyth believed

classical Calvinistic teaching, "It is not God's will that all men should be converted and saved. Yet, because we cannot know which man is reprobate, it is our duty to pray for any particular man." Smyth's view on the separation of the church from the state was surprising for the time, and in light of his other beliefs. He believed that the civil king was the supreme ruler of both the state and the church, and that the magistrate should force people to worship the true God or be punished with death, imprisonment, or confiscation of their belongings. He said that believers can pray against wicked rulers but never approved the use of force against them.[43] Later on Smyth apparently changed his view on Christian government and adopted a doctrine of free will according to man's conscience.[44]

Some of John Smyth's main contributions to the free-church movement may have been in the area of worship practices. McKibbens studied Smyth's worship and uncovered a document from one of his church members detailing the set form of worship. Smyth said that the Spirit was quenched by set forms of worship. He wrote in 1608 in a book entitled *The Differences of the Churches of the Separation* that the Spirit could be quenched in two ways. First was through silence, if anyone had some insight to add during the service they were obligated to offer it to everyone. Second, Smyth said that the reading of any book during the service quenched the Spirit. McKibbens quoted Smyth from this book as saying that reading from a book during the service was, "the invention of the man of synne it beeing substituted for a part of the spirituall worship."[45]

McKibbens put together the program for the sense of a general worship meeting. This consisted of an opening prayer, preaching of one hour each of three expositors on the same scriptural text, and a series of closing exhortations and prayer. The Separatist worship was loosely based upon three principles. First, they had to be spontaneous and open to change as their understanding of the scriptural text flowed from the expositors. Smyth often apologized for the constant changes made to his worship practices. Second, the worship had to be open to the leadings of the Holy Spirit. Third, their worship was based upon the principle of the freedom of the conscience in religious matters. Thomas Helwys, the successor of Smyth stated that even though King James did have power over his

subjects in civil affairs, his power did not extend to their conscience relating to religious concerns.[46] This thinking found its way into the modern Baptist Church.

One cannot state definitively that John Smyth founded the Baptist Church due to the various opinions on the origin of the movement itself.[47] There are at least three theories for their origin and only one of them would account for a partial Smythian genesis. This idea is called the "English Separatist descent theory.[48] The basis behind it is that the Baptist movement initiated with particular individual English Separatists. Torbet said that this is the most reasonable explanation for the origin of the Baptists, but cautioned that, "This theory must be seen in the large context of the continental Reformation and its effects upon English reformers." Some trace these roots back to the Particular Baptists who were Calvinists, and the General Baptists, like John Smyth, who were Arminian in belief. Torbet cited John Shakespeare of the Evangelical Free Church in England in 1905 as believing that the line of succession was directly from the line of Calvinistic Baptists because the General variety apostatized from theological orthodoxy. [49] Regardless, John Smyth was certainly one of the several main influencers of the movement.

John Smyth's contributions to the Christian faith were evident by the time the London Confession of English Baptist beliefs was published in 1644. Perhaps two principles of freedom of worship are the greatest legacy of Smyth and Helwys as shown in the Confession. Articles forty-nine and fifty-two contained specific reference to a doctrine developed by Smyth. This was a commitment to the principle of freedom of conscience in religious matters. This principle is something that American worshipers take for granted, but men like Smyth and Helwys suffered greatly for this radical doctrine of the age. A second point was added in an amendment in 1646. A portion of this amendment stated that during a worship service anyone that was impressed by the Holy Spirit with knowledge brought out in the preaching was obligated to share this knowledge with everyone in the assembly.[50] These two principles of freedom of worship were cornerstones in the early American Quaker movement and subsequent expansion into Baptist and other free-church denominations.

"From the extreme freedom of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, to the *Order and Prayers for*

Public Worship published in 1960 by the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, there has been a constant stress on the freedom of Baptists in the area of worship."[51] Smyth's was one of the founders of the Baptist Church as a whole. Christian, quoting Adam Taylor who wrote *The History of the English General Baptists* said, "This (church of Smyth's) appears to have been the first Baptist church composed of Englishman, after the Reformation."[52] John Smyth's legacy lives on through the rich heritage of the Baptist distinctives he developed through the progression of his beliefs in the melting pot of reformational thinking in Europe.

John Smyth left a lasting legacy on the Baptist Church in America. He emphasized a church membership consisting only of regenerate believers. Smyth believed in a single level of church leader, that of the bishop/elder with the deacons acting as "doers." He believed that baptism was the "badge of faith and is the constituting principle of church membership". He rejected the practice and doctrine of infant baptism and said that infants are incapable of faith,[53] and in later years believed in the religious freedom of conscience typical of the Puritans.

Smyth impacted the Anabaptist movement by developing his form of Separatism into Anabaptism.[54] He left a lasting legacy through Thomas Helwys who concluded that he had acted cowardly and returned to England, therefore further spreading the movement.[55] History isn't clear on the type of baptism that his church practiced so we can't make any claims regarding immersion. Overall, John Smyth was a powerful shaper of Baptist theology and made excellent contributions to the modern Baptist Church.

End Notes

[1] James E. Tull, *Shapers of Baptist Thought*, (Valley Forge: Judson, 1972), 9.

[2] Ibid., 13. This date was determined by counting backwards from the dates given by Tull from when Smyth was attending Cambridge.

[3] Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, (Valley Forge: Judson, 1950), 536.

[4] Tull, 9-10.

[5] John T. Christian, *A History of the Baptists* Vol. 1, (Texarkana, Tex.: Bogard, 1922), 222.

[6] Torbet, 33.

[7] Christian, 223.

[8] Tull, 14.

[9] David Benedict, *General History of the Baptist Denomination*, (New York: Lewis Colby, 1848), 327.

[10] Tull, 13-4.

[11] Whitley, 757.

[12] Christian, 225.

[13] Benedict, 329.

[14] Torbet, 33.

[15] Christian, 224.

[16] Tull, 14.

[17] Torbet, 37.

[18] Tull, 14.

[19] Christian, 228.

[20] Tull, 15-29, esp. 15, 18, 24.

[21] Benedict, 328.

[22] Tull, 13-4.

[23] Smyth, xii.

[24] Tull, 10.

[25] Ibid., 16.

[26] Ibid., 17.

[27] Ibid., 12-3.

[28] Ibid., 19-20.

[29] Whitley, 260-3.

[30] Tull, 21.

[31] Ibid., 24.

[32] Ibid., 22.

[33] Ibid., 23.

[34] Ibid., 24.

[35] Ibid., 25-6.

[36] Torbet, 35.

[37] Tull, 27.

[38] Torbet, 35.

[39] Ibid., 36.

[40] Tull, 18.

[41] Ibid., 27.

[42] Torbet, 38.

[43] Tull, 18.

[44] Ibid., 28.

[45] Thomas R. McKibbens, "Our Baptist Heritage in Worship," *Review and Expositor* 80 (1983): 54-5.

[46] Ibid., 56-7.

[47] The following was from Torbet, 18-21.

[48] The other two are the secessionist theory and the Anabaptist spiritual kingship theory. The former is a concept that the Baptists followed in a long line of succession from John the Baptist. This theory holds that the Baptists were always present behind the scenes of church history. The means of succession of this theory are either through apostolic succession, a chain of baptisms by the adherents, or a succession of local churches and/or groups of believers that passed on the doctrine. The latter theory holds that the movement arose through the Anabaptist movement among such earlier groups as the Dutch and Swiss Anabaptists, Waldensians, Novatians, and Donatists. Torbet, 18-21.

[49] Ibid., 20-1.

[50] McKibbens, 58.

[51] Ibid., 60.

[52] Christian, 226.

[53] Tull, 30. N.B.: Martin Luther taught that infants were capable of expressing saving faith through baptism.

[54] Christian, 234.

[55] Benedict, 330.

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