

THE PLACE OF THE RESURRECTED CHRIST IN THE WRITINGS OF JOHN SMYTH

John Smyth was acutely conscious in later life that his career had been marked by numerous alterations in his theological beliefs. In 1608 he notes that "in this writing something there is which overthwarteth my former judgment in some treatises by me formerly published: yet I would entreat the reader not to impute that as a fault to me: rather it should be accounted a virtue to retract errors".¹ And again in 1609 he feels constrained to defend his changed views on baptism, writing that "to change a false religion is commendable, and to retain a false religion is damnable".²

Though Smyth did "oft times change his religion", it can be asked whether there is not a constant thread running through his thought and writings as a Separatist from 1607-1612. B. R. White suggests, in *The English Separatist Tradition* (1971), that there are two constants in Smyth: "Just as the doctrine of the Church dominated Smyth's theological thinking when he became a Separatist, so there can be no doubt that his understanding of the divine covenant dominated his concept of the Church. In his thinking about the church, the theology of the covenant was to resume something of the central place it had once held in the thought of Robert Browne".³ The centrality of the doctrine of the Church, and the covenant as the essence of the Church, are basic to Smyth in White's view. White suggests that "arising from this [view of covenant] was the emphasis, so characteristic of developed English Separatism, upon the immediacy of the authority of the risen Christ committed to each individual fellowship of believers".⁴ White argues for the logical and temporal subordination of the concept of the risen Christ to the idea of church covenant to support his conviction that Church autonomy was a "natural" discovery under Puritan influence and not the result of influence by Anabaptist theology.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the place of the resurrected Christ in John Smyth's thought to determine if in fact it is subsidiary to the idea of covenant. The method of approach will involve study of four writings covering the period 1607-12, seeking to discover the place of this doctrine in his argumentation and the frequency of his reference to it.

THE RESURRECTED CHRIST IN SMYTH'S WRITINGS

A. *Principles and Inferences concerning the Visible Church* (1607)

This is Smyth's first Separatist tract. It is devoted to defining "the true visible Church of Christ" in contrast to "the church of anti-Christ". His discussion is broken down into a consideration of the matter, form and properties of the Church.

While White is undoubtedly correct that the covenant is included in Smyth's definition, the central concern seems to be the One with whom the covenant is made - the risen Christ: the

Church is the sphere over which Christ rules. Twice Smyth defines the Church without even mentioning the word covenant: "private persons separating from all sin and joining together to obey Christ as King, Priest and Prophet as they are bound are a true visible Church and have charter given them by Christ".⁵ "Every man must obey Christ in His Kingdom and the true Church visible is Christ's Kingdom".⁶ Those who acknowledge Christ's rule, by covenant, constitute the matter of the church for Smyth. A covenant of obedience is called for *because* the Church is Christ's Kingdom!

The "form" of the Church is two-fold, having an inward and outward aspect. Inwardly, "faith uniteth the members of the body to the head, Christ".⁷ This inward submission to the ruling Christ is manifested outwardly for Smyth by the covenant between the saints and their Lord.

The "properties" or attributes of the Church include: "Communion in Christ and His benefits" and "the power of Christ" to receive, preserve and cast out its members and officers.⁸ He argues for independent Church government from the fact of the authority it derives directly from the ruling Christ. Interference in local churches by any outside authority constitutes "tyranny".

Smyth concludes in saying that "the visible church walking in this holy order hath in it the presence and protection of Christ".⁹ Any one who is excommunicated is therefore "in the hands of Satan and out of the Lord's protection".¹⁰

The risen, ruling Christ evidently is a recurring theme in Smyth's thought and constitutes the heart of his doctrine of the visible church in this tract.

B. *The Differences of the Churches of the Separation (1608)*

This treatise is addressed by Smyth to his fellow Separatists in Amsterdam to express his disagreement with them over proper liturgy and ministry in the Church.

His discussion of liturgy begins with the affirmation that "the visible Church is Christ's Kingdom... The members of the visible Church are called the children of the kingdom. And are under the government of the Church and of Christ".¹¹ We may find it hard to sympathize with his seemingly picayune* objections to reading prayers and homilies. Even translations of the Bible are forbidden in worship for "translations began in the Church after the apostles' days... and so were not from the beginning...".¹² However, for Smyth such conclusions follow naturally from his strong conviction that human artifice interferes with Christ's ruling and governing presence in worship. His reasons include the following: "they derogate from the virtue of Christ's ascension and dignity of His Kingdom"; "they blemish Christ's bounty and care of His Church"; "they contradict the gifts bestowed by Christ upon the Church for the work of the ministry".¹³

Likewise, in discussing the role of the ministry, the argument continually turns on the issue of the authority of Christ

* worth only a U.S. 5 cent piece, insignificant, contemptible.

and the way in which he has delegated his authority to the Church. In contrast to the episcopal and presbyterian patterns, Smyth affirms that "the brethren jointly have all the power of the Kingdom and priesthood immediately from Christ... the Presbytery has no power but from the Church".¹⁴ "In the New Testament under Christ, which is the King of the Church, there is a sanhedrin or Eldership... of one kind who minister for the Church's good".¹⁵ It is interesting that White tries to argue at this point that "when he discussed the question of the final seat of church authority, it was his concept of the covenant which led Smyth to hold a conviction similar to that of Browne and Barrow".¹⁶ He quotes from the *Censures and Parallels* to this effect and implies the argument is true for the *Differences*. However no such logic is evident here. And in *Parallels, Censures, Observations* where the covenant is appealed to, the covenant itself is again put in the context of Christ's Rule over the Church: "Unto whom Christ is given for King, unto them the power of Christ the King is given, as being His deputies and lieutenants. But Christ is given for King unto the body of the Church... Unto whom the covenant and Christ is given, unto them all the promises are given... But the covenant and Christ and all the promises are given to the body of the Church...".¹⁷ To say that a congregation's "covenant" automatically leads Smyth to a view of eldership and church government is simply unclear.

Only when the covenant is further explained as the promise to be Christ's disciples (as defined in the *Character*) and to submit to his rule, does its relevance become apparent. White speaks as if congregational covenanting *per se* determines that they will have congregational rule. The transcendent aspect is omitted.

It is Smyth's respect for Christ's kingly rule over his Church, and the ways he has chosen to delegate his authority, that causes him to differ with the churches of the Separation.

C. *The Character of the Beast, or The False Constitution of the Church* (1609)

In this work, Smyth provides an extended defence of his "Anabaptist" convictions. The treatise consists of his point by point refutation of Richard Clifton's arguments in defence of baptizing children.

Again and again Smyth argues against infant baptism on the grounds that they are unable to properly submit to Christ's kingly rule. "Infants cannot by doctrine become Christ's disciples and so cannot by the rule of Christ be baptized".¹⁸ "Infants are unable to enter into the New Testament by sealing back the covenant unto the Lord and consenting unto the contract... or to be made disciples by instruction".¹⁹

The kingly rule of Christ as something that must be acknowledged and submitted to in baptism is the basic concern of Smyth's arguments.

D. *Propositions and Conclusions Concerning true Christian Religion, containing a Confession of Faith of Certain English People* (1611)

The significance this document has for the present study is the weight it gives to the doctrine of the resurrected and ruling Christ. It is instructive to note that Articles 31-39 are devoted to the atonement of Christ; articles 40-56 expound the resurrection! If the work of the Holy Spirit "which Christ asketh, obtaineth, and sendeth" be included, then articles 40-63 expound the work of the resurrected Christ. Smyth consciously makes this doctrine the centre-piece of his theology: "Christ in His resurrection, ascension and exaltation is more Lord and Christ, Saviour and King than in His humiliation, sufferings and death... the efficacy of His resurrection in the new creature is more noble and excellent than the efficacy of His death in the mortification and remission of sins" (Art.49).²⁰

The confession is permeated from start to finish by the activity of the risen, ruling Christ: Art.30, "Christ is become ... the King, Priest, and Prophet of the Church, and the faithful through Him are thus made spiritual Kings, Priests and Prophets".²¹ Art.47, "The regenerate do sit with Christ in heavenly places with Him in His throne as He sitteth with the Father in His throne".²² Art.75, "The preaching of the Word, and ministry of the sacraments represent the ministry of Christ ... who teaches, baptizes and feeds the regenerate by the Holy Spirit, inwardly and invisibly".²³ Art.84, "Christ only is the King and lawgiver of the Church and conscience".²⁴

We noted that 24 articles pertain to the resurrected Christ. It should be added that a total of eighteen speak of the Church's order and worship. A fair observation would be that the true heart of Smyth's religion and theology is not really the Church at all, as White suggests, but the resurrected, ruling Christ. This may account for Smyth's eventual resolution in his last year of life to "put an end to all controversies and questions about the outward Church and ceremonies... and to spend my time in the main matters wherein consisteth salvation". (*The Retraction*).²⁵

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the study is that the resurrected Christ, in his character as ruling King, constitutes the dominating factor in Smyth's view of the Church from 1607-1612. Smyth's sense of proper order in the visible Church was based on his understanding of an invisible spiritual order: the rule of the resurrected Christ over his people. Subsidiary to this are his convictions regarding the Church covenant, the authority of the whole congregation and the baptism of true believers only. A constant thread remains amidst continual innovation.

This conclusion challenges White's view that "the authority of the covenanted group" is even more basic than the authority of the ruling Christ for Smyth's ecclesiology. And it gives even greater reason to suspect Anabaptist influence on separatists like Browne and Smyth. For White admits that "it is not

easy to assert with any real certainty the source of Browne's unusual... 'mutualist' interpretation" of the Church's covenant relationship of obedience to Christ the King.²⁶ "The mutualist interpretation was by no means characteristic of contemporary Puritan thinking".²⁷ But the commitment to obedient discipleship under the Risen Lord *was* characteristic of continental Anabaptism.

NOTES

- 1 *The Works of John Smyth*, ed. by W. T. Whitley (Cambridge University Press, 1915), vol.I, p.271.
- 2 *Ibid.*, vol.II, p.564.
- 3 B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 1971), p.125.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.163.
- 5 *Smyth*, p.267.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.267.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.253.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.261.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.267.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.266.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.274.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p.290.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p.292.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.315.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p.308.
- 16 *White*, p.129.
- 17 *Smyth*, p.389.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p.574.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p.645.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p.741.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p.737.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p.740.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p.746.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p.748.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p.755.
- 26 *White*, p.55.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p.55.