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## THE THEOLOGICAL POSITIONS OF JOHN SMYTH

In his lifetime John Smyth (c.1565-1612) was successively a Puritan, a Separatist, a Baptist and an Anabaptist. This essay will examine each of these stages in turn. In the course of the discussion light will be thrown on the key questions of whether Smyth was influenced by Anabaptists and whether the seventeenth century General Baptists who sprung from him were Protestants or Anabaptists.<sup>1</sup> As well, attention will be given to the attempts of some commentators to find a key doctrine maintained by Smyth throughout his shifts. B. R. White has suggested that this central doctrine is the idea of the covenant,<sup>2</sup> but Douglas Shantz thinks the crucial doctrine is 'the resurrected Christ, in His character as Ruling King'.<sup>3</sup>

### I

In Smyth's first stage, from his student days at Cambridge until roughly 1605, he published two books, *The Bright Morning Starre* (1603), an exposition of Psalm 22, and *A Paterne of True Prayer* (1605), an exposition of the Lord's Prayer. As these works are devotional and as Smyth published them in part to overcome charges of heresy, they do not, in James E. Tull's words, 'furnish a checklist by which to number Smyth's Puritan tendencies'.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that Smyth was an orthodox Protestant and Puritan. He believed in Scripture as 'the rule of faith and manners',<sup>5</sup> 'Christ Iesus God-man',<sup>6</sup> 'originall sinne',<sup>7</sup> the total depravity of man,<sup>8</sup> 'the Lords predestination',<sup>9</sup> the perseverance of the saints,<sup>10</sup> and 'iustification by faith onely'.<sup>11</sup> He interpreted the atonement as satisfaction for sins<sup>12</sup> and salvation as imputed righteousness,<sup>13</sup> declared that God's glory was the purpose of creation and redemption,<sup>14</sup> and believed that 'faith and repentance' were the sum of the gospel.<sup>15</sup> He did not say much about ecclesiology but rejected Separatism<sup>16</sup> and Anabaptism<sup>17</sup> and evidently accepted the Church of England.<sup>18</sup> He followed Calvin in seeing five Church officers: teacher, pastor, ruling elders, deacons and widows.<sup>19</sup> He believed that 'the Magistrates should cause all men to worship the true God'<sup>20</sup> and enforce both tables of the Ten Commandments.<sup>21</sup> Finally, he abhorred toleration,<sup>22</sup> accepted the swearing of oaths<sup>23</sup> and the use of force,<sup>24</sup> and believed that men should work hard in their 'callings'.<sup>25</sup> The only hint of more heretical views is that Smyth avoided discussing fully the officers of the church,<sup>26</sup> urged that magistrates should not persecute the true church<sup>27</sup> or be followed in opposing God's word,<sup>28</sup> and suggested that there were areas that were not yet clear to him.<sup>29</sup>

### II

In his second stage, from 1606 to perhaps 1608, Smyth was a

Separatist. It is generally assumed that the English Separatists were Puritan Calvinists,<sup>30</sup> and this is generally true. Judging by his two chief works in this period, *Principles and Inferences Concerning the Visible Church* (1607) and *Paralleles, Censures, Observations* (1609), Smyth also remained a Calvinist. According to these books, Smyth believed in Scriptural authority,<sup>31</sup> God's glory,<sup>32</sup> faith,<sup>33</sup> predestination<sup>34</sup> and probably total depravity.<sup>35</sup> He opposed Anabaptism,<sup>36</sup> accepted the oath<sup>37</sup> and declared that magistrates should erect true churches<sup>38</sup> and enforce both tables of the Ten Commandments.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, he admitted that Puritans and Separatists both looked to the Reformed Churches of the continent for guidance.<sup>40</sup> He even argued, against his Puritan opponent, 'your selves doe approve al that wee professe in substance except the Separation'<sup>41</sup> and added, 'our cause is the same in a manner with the Puritane cause, onely they dare not practise as wee doe'.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, it is more difficult to determine Smyth's theology from his writings in this period because he was not primarily concerned with theology. Ecclesiology was paramount in his mind. White rightly declares that 'the doctrine of the Church dominated Smyth's theological thinking when he became a Separatist'.<sup>43</sup> Whereas earlier Smyth had considered the sum of the gospel to be faith and repentance,<sup>44</sup> he now believed that 'the summe of the gospel is this, that Iesus Christ the Sonne of God, & the Sonne of Mary, is the only King, Priest, & Prophet of his Church'.<sup>45</sup> The first half of this definition was taken from his opponent, and, as we shall see, the second half was basically a definition of the Church.

Smyth argued that the Puritans agreed with the Separatists on all points 'except the Separation'. Yet the basic argument used by Separatists for separation from the Church of England was drawn from Calvin's *Institutes*. In the *Institutes*, II, xv, Calvin had described Christ as Prophet, Priest and King in the Christian Church. Corresponding to each of these three roles was a sign of the true Church: the word, the sacraments and discipline.<sup>46</sup> (Perhaps because the Roman Catholic Popes had laid too much stress on the third aspect, attempting to rule over the kings of Christendom, Calvin actually limited the marks of the true Church to the true preaching of the word and the proper administration of the sacraments.<sup>47</sup> However, the third aspect, discipline, was implied and was necessary in order to balance his system). The Puritan Separatists separated from the Church of England because it lacked this third element. While it preached the true word (justification by faith, Scriptural authority) and administered the sacraments properly (as signs of grace rather than as vehicles of grace, communion in both kinds), it did not properly exercise discipline. Discipline was defined from Matthew 16.19 and 18.15-18 as the power to bind and loose, the authority to accept believers into the Church and to exclude sinners from the sacraments. According to the Separatists, the Church of England did not do this; it allowed notorious sinners and those lacking true faith to partake of the sacraments. Thus it was possible to see the Church of England as a false church and one in which true Christians could not remain.

If the criticism and separation from the Church of England was on Calvinist lines, however, the erection of the Separatist churches was not. As far back as Robert Browne, the Separatists had formed churches by means of a sworn covenant. In 1591, Francis Johnson, later pastor of the exiled Ancient Church<sup>48</sup> in Amsterdam, formed a church with this covenant:

Wee doe willinglie ioyne together to live as the Church of Christe... To this ende wee doe promise henceforthe to keep what soever Christe our Lorde hath commanded us, as it shall please him by his holie spiritt out of his worde to give knowledge thereof and abilitie there unto.<sup>49</sup>

The formation of John Smyth's Separatist church in Gainsborough about 1606 followed very closely this example. He and his followers

as the Lords free people joyned them selves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a Church estate, in the fellowship of the gospell, to walke in all his wayes, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.<sup>50</sup>

This similarity is scarcely surprising since Smyth evidently consulted Francis Johnson before becoming a Separatist.

That this covenant definition of the Church is not Calvinist is quite evident. It does not mention the Old Testament-related concept of Prophet, Priest and King nor the three marks of the Church, the word, sacraments and discipline. It is not based on the Pauline epistles which John S. Coolidge claims are the source of Puritan theology.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, its 'further light clause',<sup>52</sup> 'to be made known', is the very opposite of the Calvinist attitude that Scripture has clearly and adequately defined all necessary doctrine. Finally, this covenant ecclesiology should not be confused with Calvinist covenant theology.<sup>53</sup> Covenant theology was a theory of salvation whereby God made a covenant with all the elect. In this view, the New Testament covenant was merely a continuation of the Old Testament covenant. Covenant ecclesiology, however, consisted of a covenant among individual men and women and between those individual men and women and God. B. R. White thinks that Smyth confused these two covenants,<sup>54</sup> but in fact Smyth hardly ever discussed covenant theology at all. Later on, covenant theology was Richard Clifton's chief argument against believer's baptism, which was merely an extension of Smyth's doctrine of the Church.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, caution must be exercised in using White's dictum that 'the understanding of the divine covenant dominated his [Smyth's] concept of the Church'.<sup>56</sup> The idea of the covenant church was not original with Smyth. It did not relate to any covenant theology he might have held before, during or after his Separatist stage, and it was not the centre of his understanding of the Church before his Separatist phase (which White recognizes) nor after his Separatist phase (which White does not recognize).

While Roman Catholic ecclesiology is based partly on the Old Testament and Calvinist ecclesiology is based on the Pauline epistles, it is significant that covenant ecclesiology is taken from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 18, verse 20:

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. (AV)

Smyth cited this verse ten times in *The Visible Church* and eleven times in *Paralleles*. His dependence on this verse is also obvious from the typical phrasing he used to describe the covenant church, 'two, three, or moe Saints joynd together'.<sup>57</sup> It is strange that White does not seem to notice this dependence, particularly since he clearly understands the importance of verses 15-17 in the same chapter for Smyth's position on discipline.

Shantz also does not recognize this source, and it is even more crucial for his argument. Shantz argues that the ruling Christ is more central than the idea of the covenant, yet in fact, as far as ecclesiology and Smyth's Separatist stage are concerned, both doctrines come from the same verse:

For where two or three are gathered together in my name (the covenant), there am I (the ruling Christ) in the midst of them.

Even the word 'For' at the beginning of this verse is significant: it suggests that verse 20 is an explanation of what went before. What went before is the doctrine of discipline in verses 15-18, which, as we have seen, in Calvinist theology was the ecclesiological essence of Christ's Kingship.

Moreover, Matthew 18.20 stresses that it is to the church (two or three gathered together) that Christ comes with all His attendant benefits and powers<sup>58</sup> and not to the elders or officers of the church. In practice, this means that the congregation rather than the leadership has final authority in the Church. This is reinforced by Matthew 18.1-6, which stresses that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven will be humble as a child.<sup>59</sup> This concept of congregational authority is one of the distinctives that set apart Smyth and his followers from the Puritans and from other Separatists.

In 1608, between *Principles and Inferences Concerning The Visible Church* and *Paralleles, Censures, Observations*, Smyth also published another book, *The Differences of the Churches of the Seperation*. This book should be discussed separately since it displays another aspect of Smyth's Separatist orientation. In *The Visible Church* and *Paralleles* Smyth was defending Separatism against Puritans, but in *The Differences of the Churches* he was defending his own brand of Separatism against Francis Johnson, Henry Ainsworth and the Ancient Church. This book has been dismissed as 'curious'<sup>60</sup> since it seems to concern trifling differences, yet in the context of Smyth's ecclesiology they were not trifling.

Basically, Smyth found three differences between his church and the Ancient Church. Least complicated of the three was

that Smyth believed true churches should receive money only from their members, whereas the Ancient Church accepted donations from outsiders. This position of Smyth's was simply an extension of the principle of separation from the ungodly.<sup>61</sup> The second disagreement was over church officers. The Ancient Church had kept the Calvinist spiritual officers of teacher, pastor and ruling elders<sup>62</sup> (responsible, it will be noted, for the word, sacraments and discipline). Smyth now rejected these distinctions based on a reinterpretation of Ephesians 4.11. He argued that there was only one type of elder, entrusted by the church with all three functions, and that there were always several equal elders in a church. (This last was an implied criticism of Francis Johnson's domination of the Ancient Church).

Smyth's third disagreement seems rather silly to modern observers, but in fact is very important and takes up most of *The Differences of the Churches*. Radical Puritans had objected to the Book of Common Prayer and to reciting prayers such as the Lord's Prayer on the grounds that prayer should be guided by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8.26) and that recited prayers thus quenched the Spirit (I Thess. 5.19). Moreover, recited prayers were not found in the New Testament, and hence were invented by man, unbiblical and Antichristian. In his Puritan days Smyth had rejected these arguments,<sup>63</sup> but he had accepted them on becoming a Separatist. Now, in opposition to the Ancient Church, he argued that the other forms of worship, prophesying (= preaching) and praise (= hymn singing) should also be free to be guided by the Spirit. In practice, this meant that books, hymnals, notes and even the Bible were not to be used in worship proper.

This approach had only superficial elements of Calvinism. It reflected the traditional Protestant rejection of Catholic ritual, and it was consistent with the Puritan principle that whatever was not specifically prescribed in the Bible was Antichristian and hence not to be used in worship.<sup>64</sup> However, Smyth's position also rejected other elements of Calvinism. It reduced the functions of the true Church to two, the priesthood and kingship,<sup>65</sup> perhaps because Matthew 18 mentioned only prayer (verse 19) and discipline (verses 15-18). Moreover, by priesthood Smyth understood the offering of spiritual sacrifices (prayer, praise and prophecy) and made no mention of the sacraments which Calvinists considered the main duty of the priesthood. The description which we have of a typical Sunday in Smyth's congregation reveals seven or eight hours devoted to such spiritual worship, a little to Bible study and discipline, and none to the sacraments.<sup>66</sup> More fundamentally, however, Smyth's new understanding was at least somewhat antagonistic to the whole thrust of Protestantism. Protestantism was based on the authority of Scripture, and Calvin had insisted that the Old Testament was as relevant as the New Testament, but Smyth now placed more importance on the direct guidance of the Spirit than on the Bible. Moreover, in opposition to Calvin, he rejected much of the Old Testament as carnal and hailed the New Testament as Spiritual. This emphasis on the Holy Spirit is further

evident in the fact that the most frequently cited Bible books in Smyth's three books in this period were Acts and I Corinthians, the same books stressed most by present-day charismatics.<sup>67</sup> It is not possible, either, to equate the Holy Spirit with Shantz's ruling Christ since, as we have seen, the ruling Christ is normally concerned with discipline in Smyth's thought.<sup>68</sup>

These seemingly minor differences with the Ancient Church are significant also considering Smyth's definition of the Church. He analyzed Matthew 18.20 this way: the true Church consisted of the true matter (saints), the true form (the covenant) and the true properties. The true properties were the holy things of God and the power of Christ. The power of Christ consisted of discipline and ordination, and the holy things were Christ and His benefits. These benefits were alms and the means of salvation (word, sacraments, prayers, censures and ordinances).<sup>69</sup> Since the Ancient Church erred on alms, the power of Christ and prayers, they erred on several key elements of the constitution of the Church and hence by Smyth's definition were potentially a false church.

### III

In late 1608 or early 1609, John Smyth made the change that seemed the most drastic of his career and which most shocked his contemporaries. He rejected the pedobaptism of the Church of England and rebaptized himself and his followers. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Anabaptists were abhorred,<sup>70</sup> and se-baptism (self-baptism) seemed worse. Yet, as later commentators have pointed out, this was merely a logical extension of Smyth's previous doctrines. The Separatists had rejected the Church of England, its preaching, its communion, its officers and its discipline. Already in the *Paralleles* Smyth had hinted that Anglican baptism should also be rejected.<sup>71</sup> Now of course Smyth did not merely replace Anglican pedobaptism with Separatist pedobaptism. He substituted believers' baptism. Yet this too was only a logical extension of previously held convictions. If the Separatists restricted church membership to those who had covenanted with God, it was logical that church membership and privileges could not be given to children since they could not make covenants. Smyth found many different ways of phrasing these ideas, but his basic position is clear and its logic impressive: either the Separatists must admit they accepted the Church of England and its baptism and return to it or the Catholic Church, or they must go forward to believers' baptism.<sup>72</sup> Some contemporary conformist Puritans agreed with Smyth, and Francis Johnson was convinced to the point of retreating in the general direction of Anglicanism and Calvinism.<sup>73</sup>

The aspect that shocked most contemporaries was that Smyth and his followers presumed to baptize themselves. Yet this too was consistent with Smyth's previous ideas. He had already rejected succession in ordination and insisted that every truly constituted church congregation had full power in them-

selves to administer the sacraments. Such powers belonged to the church, not to ordained ministers, and therefore a congregation had every right to baptize themselves.

Despite the rebaptism, on the surface Smyth seemed to have retained much of his orthodox Calvinist theology. In his only work from this period, *The Character of the Beast or The False Constitution of the Church*, Smyth accepted that 'Christ is one person in two distinct natures, the Godhead and manhood'.<sup>74</sup> He made use of the Puritan understanding of Scriptural authority. (Since there was no Scriptural warrant for infant baptism, it was Antichristian).<sup>75</sup> He believed in 'justification by Faith',<sup>76</sup> original sin,<sup>77</sup> and predestination.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, however, Smyth was gradually moving farther away from Calvinism. He cited a passage from Tertullian which possibly denied original sin.<sup>79</sup> He no longer knew whether the magistrate (if one ever were converted to the true church) should enforce the true religion.<sup>80</sup> Above all, in arguing against Richard Clifton, he specifically rejected Calvinist covenant theology. Calvin had said that the sacraments were the seals of the New Testament covenant, but Smyth argued that the Holy Spirit was that seal. Calvin had equated New Testament baptism with Old Testament circumcision, but Smyth believed the New Testament equivalent to circumcision to be circumcision of the heart by the Spirit (Phil. 3.3, Col. 2.11). Thus Smyth maintained the stress on the Spirit he had first developed in *The Differences of the Churches of the Separation*: Old Testament succession was carnal, but New Testament succession was spiritual; the Old Testament covenant and seals were physical, but the New Testament covenant and seals were spiritual.

Smyth was also moving away from Puritan Separatism. He was in the process of abandoning his previous detailed interpretation of the covenant. He now equated the covenant with believers' baptism.<sup>81</sup> In fact believers' baptism was becoming a substitute for the covenant as the true constitution of a true church.<sup>82</sup> This is especially evident in John Robinson's account of events: 'Mr Smyth, Mr Helwys and the rest, having utterly dissolved, and disclaimed their former Church [formed by covenant]... came together to erect a new Church by baptism'.<sup>83</sup> Matthew 18.20 was cited only once in *The Character of the Beast* and not at all in Smyth's later writings. This implies that White is wrong in seeing the covenant as central in Smyth's theology after 1608. More importantly, however, the substitution of believers' baptism for the covenant paved the way for the final stage in Smyth's development. Smyth's increasingly rigorous definition of the church as constituted by covenant had led him to separate from the Anglicans and then from the Separatists. His new definition of the true church as constituted by believers' baptism would lead him into union with one other branch of the Christian Church. In February 1610 Smyth and many of his followers applied to join the Waterlander Mennonite Church.<sup>84</sup>

## IV

What led to this momentous decision can only be guessed at, but it did follow logically from some of Smyth's previously stated principles. If believers' baptism defined a true church, then of course the Mennonites were a true church... and Smyth had always said he preferred union to separation unless he considered separation to be necessary.<sup>85</sup> This logical deduction is well argued by White.<sup>86</sup> However, there is some evidence to suggest that Smyth's switch to Anabaptism was at least as much a theological decision as an ecclesiological one. Few scholars have discussed Smyth's final theological position. This may be because three of Smyth's five works in this period (*The First Baptist Confession, Defence of Ries' Confession, Argumenta Contra Baptismum Infantum*) were written in Latin,<sup>87</sup> a language few modern scholars read. Nevertheless, the two English works, *Propositions and conclusions, concerning true Christian Religion, conteyning a confession of faith of certaine English people, livinge at Amsterdam* and *The Last Booke of Iohn Smith Called the Retractation of His Errours, and the Confirmation of the Truth*, are sufficient to reveal at least the outlines of Smyth's new Anabaptist theology.

In his first tract promoting believers' baptism, *The Character of the Beast*, Smyth had come face to face with the problem of original sin, and it was on this doctrine that he began to break away from theological Calvinism. Fundamental to Calvinist theology is the concept of the duality of God's will. There is God's revealed will (the law and gospel, the Bible), and there is God's secret will (predestination). Smyth had already used this concept in his works on Separation. There he had argued that God had revealed His will for the formation of the Church and that thus only those who were in churches that visibly followed God's pattern were true visible Christians. He had admitted that God had predestined many in the false churches to salvation, but they were invisible since they seemed to be following false doctrine.<sup>88</sup> In *The Character of the Beast*, Smyth applied the same principle to infants and baptism. When Clifton argued that refusing to baptize infants damned them, Smyth replied that baptism did not save. Refusing to baptize children excluded them from the visible church, but many children (and perhaps all) would be saved invisibly by predestination.<sup>89</sup>

The 'perhaps all' suggestion is significant. Maybe to avoid the frightening prospect of damned children, Smyth became a theological Anabaptist. He decided that all children were definitely saved on the grounds that there was no original sin.<sup>90</sup> Babies were born innocent.<sup>91</sup> No original sin meant that man's free will was not lost in the fall,<sup>92</sup> and this in turn meant that predestination was denied.<sup>93</sup> Smyth also dropped some key elements of Protestantism. For instance, justification by the satisfaction of Christ for sins is the traditional interpretation of Protestantism,<sup>94</sup> but Smyth interpreted justification as a combination of this and regeneration

by the Holy Spirit.<sup>95</sup> This comes very close to justification by faith and works. In fact, in the end, Smyth was in danger of denying the satisfaction interpretation altogether.<sup>96</sup>

Anabaptist Christology has commonly been suspect, and Smyth's was no exception. This is one of the key issues over which Thomas Helwys and some others in Smyth's congregation refused to follow Smyth into Anabaptism. Smyth's Christology did not deny the Biblical record or the virgin birth or that Christ was God and man. Rather, he flirted with Anabaptist Melchiorite Christology that Christ received His second flesh but not His first flesh from Mary.<sup>97</sup> Smyth's attitude was based on current medical theory.<sup>98</sup> Melchiorite Christology was caricatured as saying that Christ passed through the Virgin Mary 'as water passes through a pipe',<sup>99</sup> but in fact, according to one current medical theory, all babies passed through their mothers' wombs 'as water through a pipe'.<sup>100</sup> The father's seed (the first flesh) developed into the baby and took the characteristics of its father. The prime qualification of the mother was sufficient strength and health to nourish the child (that is, to give it its second flesh). To say that Mary provided more than just the second flesh (nourishment) would ignore the suggestion in Matthew 1.18 that the Holy Spirit provided the seed, give Mary a greater role than any other mother and perhaps render her a fit object for worship. Yet Smyth said he was willing to concede even that Christ received both first and second flesh from Mary - only he was not willing to make it a test of fellowship.<sup>101</sup> Smyth must have made even more heretical statements in private, for Helwys accused him of denying the miracles and physical human life of Christ. Smyth replied that he did not deny these, but that as physical occurrences they were unimportant. He allegorized the miracles and incarnation as spiritual benefits Christ worked in believers.<sup>102</sup> This position, it will be noted, is very close to nineteenth and twentieth century liberal theology.

Smyth also accepted Anabaptist attitudes to the state.<sup>103</sup> He now believed that magistrates were necessary but should not interfere in religious affairs or enforce the first table of the Ten Commandments.<sup>104</sup> (This was based on Smyth's idea of the radical separation of the carnal Old Testament and spiritual New Testament. While Old Testament kings had been supposed to execute judgement on heretics, true believers were the kings of the New Testament and employed spiritual execution, excommunication from the Church). It followed that Christians could not be magistrates, use force or swear oaths.<sup>105</sup>

Despite all this, some Calvinist elements remained. Smyth maintained the Puritan Scriptural principle that whatever was not specifically prescribed in Scripture ought not to be done in the Church<sup>106</sup> (although he also maintained his earlier suggestion that the Holy Spirit was more important than Scripture<sup>107</sup>). Smyth also retained his belief in Christ as Prophet, Priest and King giving His word, sacraments and discipline to the Church.<sup>108</sup> In opposition to both the Separatists and the Mennonites, he believed that the church congregated

gation retained all the powers of the Church,<sup>109</sup> and he believed that there were only two officers in the Church, elders and deacons.<sup>110</sup>

In many of these last things Smyth differed as much from the Anabaptists as he did from the Separatists and Calvinists, yet he chose to join the Mennonites. The reason is not hard to find. All of these deal with ecclesiology - and (*pace* White) ecclesiology was no longer paramount in Smyth's thinking. Theology had taken its place. Therefore, Smyth's movement into his final Anabaptist position was as much a change in topic as it was a change in viewpoint.<sup>111</sup> Repeatedly in his last work Smyth emphasized that he would unite with anyone who was a true brother theologically even if they disagreed ecclesologically - for ecclesiology was 'of inferiour note'.<sup>112</sup>

In his last position Smyth thus returned to the theological interest from which his excursion into Separatist ecclesiology had distracted him.<sup>113</sup> In his later works, the Gospel of Matthew again became his favourite source of Bible citations:<sup>114</sup> In his first days he had said that faith and repentance was the sum of the gospel.<sup>115</sup> Faith and repentance also became the dominating theme of his final position, appearing in at least six articles of his last statement of faith<sup>116</sup> and repeatedly in his *Last Booke*.<sup>117</sup>

Between John Smyth himself and the Anabaptists there is one other very obvious similarity: the emphasis on the Holy Spirit. It is perhaps too much to say that the Holy Spirit dominated all phases of Smyth's theology, but it certainly appeared in all phases and is probably the most dominant theme overall.<sup>118</sup> Even as a Puritan, Smyth had denied the ability of Scripture alone to define clearly certain points. This had led naturally to an acceptance of the Separatist 'further light clause',<sup>119</sup> an openness to further revelation. In his Separatist stage, as we have seen, Smyth preferred spiritual worship to book-worship. In arguing for believers' baptism he emphasized the superiority of the spiritual New Testament covenant to the carnal Old Testament covenant, the spiritual seal of circumcision of the heart to carnal seals like physical circumcision and baptism, and the spiritual second birth to physical birth as a prerequisite for entrance into the covenant. Finally, as an Anabaptist, Smyth preferred to stress spiritual theology rather than carnal ecclesiology (the outward church), the spiritual interpretation of Christ's physical miracles, Christ's spiritual rather than physical nature. This emphasis on the Spirit is widely recognized as the chief characteristic of the Anabaptism that spread into England in the sixteenth century.<sup>120</sup> Luther standing on the word to denounce the spiritual *Schwärmer* reveals one of the important differences between Protestantism and Anabaptism. There is no evidence to suggest that Smyth received any Anabaptist influence prior to his rebaptism. Yet, whether his emphasis on the Spirit was borrowed from the Anabaptists or developed on his own, it is clear that John Smyth, on this matter as on his anthropology, theology and ecclesiology, was definitely an Anabaptist.

## V

While it is certain that Smyth ultimately reached an Anabaptist position, there remains the question of Anabaptist influence on Smyth and his followers in coming to that position. It is clear that in becoming Separatists Smyth and his followers closely followed the example of Francis Johnson and the Ancient Church, who in turn followed in the footsteps of Browne, Barrow and Greenwood. It is clear also that they considered themselves Protestants, feeling kinship to continental Reformed churches rather than to Anabaptists. Their theology was Calvinist, but their ecclesiology contained Calvinist (Prophet, Priest and King) and Anabaptist (the covenant) elements. If any Anabaptist influence is to be discerned here, it must be on Robert Browne, who first stressed the covenant idea,<sup>121</sup> rather than on John Smyth.

The controversy over Anabaptist influence on Smyth himself centres on his crucial decision to re-baptize himself. White and others stress, quite rightly, that believers' baptism was a logical extension of Separatism: infants could not make covenants, and infant baptism was the prime source of the mixed character of the Church of England. Secondly, the Church Fathers whom Smyth used to defend believers' baptism are unlikely to have been suggested by Anabaptists.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, influences are not passed on by osmosis through proximity. There is evidence that the language barrier severely restricted meaningful contact between English Separatists and Dutch Mennonites.<sup>123</sup> The ultimate argument against Anabaptist influence, however, is that Smyth and his followers baptized themselves. If Smyth's claims of consistency on this point are to be taken seriously,<sup>124</sup> he and his followers baptized themselves only because they did not know of any other true churches that could baptize them. If the Mennonites had convinced them of the correctness of believers' baptism, surely Smyth and his followers would have asked the Mennonites to rebaptize them.<sup>125</sup>

A more likely area of Anabaptist influence on John Smyth is his switch from Calvinist to Anabaptist theology. It seems clear that Smyth was still a Calvinist when he wrote *The Character of the Beast* early in 1609.<sup>126</sup> It is likely that he was an Anabaptist by the time he and his followers applied to join the Waterlander Mennonites in February 1610. This is likely for two reasons. First, Smyth would not apply to join a group with whom he had serious theological differences, since he now considered theological concerns to be all-important. Secondly, there is the evidence of the Helwys group, who accepted Smyth's switch to Anabaptist theology but split with Smyth by refusing to apply to join the Waterlanders.

What influenced Smyth to change his theology in 1609-10 must be deduced from circumstantial evidence. Either Smyth changed his theology as a result of his own study of the Bible and the Fathers or he was influenced by Dutch Arminians or Anabaptists. The first is possible but unlikely. Smyth's

originality has been greatly overestimated. His only previous sudden major shift in viewpoint, the acceptance of Separatism, was clearly dictated by the influence of Francis Johnson and the Ancient Church. The Arminians loom as a possible influence since they were certainly active in Amsterdam at this time, yet they too are unlikely. If it was Arminian influence that caused Smyth and his followers to change their minds, surely they would have applied to join the Arminians. The most likely source of influence was the Dutch Anabaptists. Smyth would not have applied to join the Mennonites until he had learned something about them. Serious discussions must have preceded the formal application. This again is confirmed by the Helwys group, whose relationship with the Waterlanders preceded Smyth's application to join.<sup>127</sup> We must conclude that Anabaptist influence prompted the change in Smyth's theology in 1609-10.

## VI

Finally, we come to the question of whether the English General Baptists founded by the Helwys group were Anabaptists or Protestants. The grounds on which the Helwys group refused to join the Mennonite Church are most instructive in deciding this question. There were some theological differences. The Helwys group objected to the Melchiorite Christology and to the Anabaptist attitude to the state.<sup>128</sup> Nevertheless, they did not object to most of the Anabaptist theology. They denied predestination and original sin and believed in free will.<sup>129</sup> This Anabaptist theology, combined with their Anabaptist ecclesiology based on believers' baptism, suggests that they were Anabaptists, in spite of their Calvinist attitude to the state.<sup>130</sup>

What the Helwys group did about their objections to the application to the Mennonites confirms that they were Anabaptists. Helwys and his followers wrote to the Waterlander Mennonite Church as 'dearest brothers'<sup>131</sup> and asked them not to accept Smyth. They would never have done this unless they felt some sort of kinship with the Mennonites. The Helwys group would not, for instance, have addressed such a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury if Smyth had decided to rejoin the Church of England. As well, the Helwys group seems to have thought that there was a good chance of the Mennonites agreeing with them and rejecting the merger. Helwys and his followers appealed to the Mennonites in the name of the covenant church. They argued that for the Mennonites to accept Smyth would be to deny the validity of the gathered church reinstated by believers' baptism. It would imply acceptance of the necessity of succession in church, baptism and officers. The Helwys group was confident that the Mennonites rejected such succession.<sup>132</sup> This may have been the thorny issue on which the Waterlander Mennonites were uncertain, causing them to seek the advice of other Mennonite congregations. Hence we conclude that the Helwys group refused to join the Mennonite Church, not because they did not want to become Anabaptists, but because they were convinced

that they already were. The whole point in sending their confession of faith to the Waterlanders was to prove that they were orthodox Anabaptists without joining the Mennonite Church, more orthodox in fact than Smyth. In appealing to the Mennonite Church, the Helwys group acknowledged their Anabaptist status. Even after their return to England, it was the Mennonites with whom the General Baptists sought relations rather than the continental Reformed churches,<sup>133</sup> and in the end the General Baptists disappeared into the very unitarianism that they feared in John Smyth and the Waterlanders. As White and Payne argue, whether or not one can determine direct Anabaptist influence, Smyth and the General Baptists clearly went down the same path as continental Anabaptists.<sup>134</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Questions concerning the origins and position of Particular Baptists lie beyond the scope of this paper.
- 2 B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition: From the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers*, Oxford, 1971, p.125.
- 3 Douglas Shantz, "The Place of the Resurrected Christ in the Writings of John Smyth", *Baptist Quarterly*, XXX (Jan.1984), p.202.
- 4 James E. Tull, *Shapers of Baptist Thought*, Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1972, p.15.
- 5 John Smyth, "A Paterne of True Prayer", *The Works of John Smyth: Fellow of Christ's College, 1594-8*, ed. W. T. Whitley, Cambridge, 1915, I, p. 105. This point is very crucial. John S. Coolidge points out the different use of Scripture by Anglicans and Puritans. Anglicans felt free to worship in any way that was not forbidden by Scripture. Puritans would only worship in ways that were specifically prescribed by Scripture. (John S. Coolidge, *The Pauline Renaissance in England: Puritanism and the Bible*, Oxford, 1970, pp.1,7,24. Cf. also John F. H. New, *Anglican and Puritan: The Basis of Their Opposition, 1556-1640*, Stanford, 1964, p.28). In the Puritan view, therefore, every means of worship devised by men was not only not Christian but was definitely Antichristian. It will be seen that here the Anglicans followed Calvin and the Puritans Zwingli. On this matter, Smyth was definitely a Puritan.
- 6 "Prayer", p.211.
- 7 Ibid., p.181.
- 8 Smyth, "The Bright Morning Starre", op.cit., I, 62; "Prayer", p.108.
- 9 "Prayer", p.134.
- 10 Ibid., p.220.
- 11 "Starre", p.66.
- 12 "Prayer", p.207.
- 13 "Prayer", p.217.
- 14 "Starre", p.26.
- 15 "Prayer", p.157.
- 16 "Prayer", p.71.
- 17 "Prayer", p.165.
- 18 "Starre", p.69.
- 19 "Prayer", p.158; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970, book IV, ch.iii, paragraphs 4-9.

- 20 "Prayer", p.166. 21 Ibid., p.161.
- 22 Ibid., p.166. 23 Ibid., p.140.
- 24 Ibid., p.203. 25 Ibid., p.191.
- 26 Ibid., p.153. 27 Ibid., p.151.
- 28 Ibid., pp.159, 180. 29 Ibid., pp.104,131,243-4.
- 30 See, for example, Lonnie D. Kliever, "General Baptist Origins: The Question of Anabaptist Influence", *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XXXVI, 1962, p.293.
- 31 Smyth, "Principles and Inferences Concerning The Visible Church", op. cit., I, pp.252,261; Smyth, "Paralleles, Censures, Observations", op. cit., II, pp.383,451,522.
- 32 "Visible Church", p.252.
- 33 "Visible Church", p.255; "Paralleles", p.522.
- 34 "Paralleles", p.350.
- 35 I assume this since Smyth said that whatever man on his own attempts to do in worship is sinful. ("Paralleles", pp.464,499).
- 36 "Paralleles", pp.349-50,385. 37 "Visible Church", p.262.
- 38 "Visible Church", p.267; "Paralleles", pp.394,507.
- 39 "Paralleles", p.519. 40 Ibid., p.432.
- 41 Ibid., p.505. 42 Ibid., p.527; cf."Paralleles", p.515.
- 43 White, op.cit., p.125. 44 "Prayer", p.157.
- 45 "Paralleles", p.471.
- 46 Most of Smyth's arguments with Bernard against the Church of England centre on this precise argument, with both sides generally accepting Calvin's definition of the Church; e.g., see "Paralleles", pp.460, 473-7,510,550.
- 47 *Institutes*, IV, i, p.9.
- 48 It was called the Ancient Church presumably because it returned to the ancient primitive character of the apostolic church - as opposed to the Roman Catholic Church which was merely old.
- 49 Champlin Burrage, *The Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research (1550-1641)*, 2 vols., New York, 1912, 1967, I, 138.
- 50 Ibid., I, pp.230. 51 Op.cit.
- 52 The phrase is White's, op.cit., p.123.
- 53 Coolidge makes this error in his fifth chapter, "The Covenant of Grace".
- 54 White, op.cit., p.128.
- 55 Smyth, "The Character of the Beast or the False Constitution of the Church", op.cit., II, pp.563-680.
- 56 White, op.cit., p.125.
- 57 "Visible Church", p.252 58 Ibid., p.254.
- 59 Thus, Smyth believed that in the New Testament all Church members were prophets, priests and kings, an understanding that was to have greater implications later on when Smyth ceased to be a Separatist.





- 111 We should be wary of understanding the *Last Booke* as merely an indication of increased tolerance. The question is what did Smyth tolerate and why? Tolerance based on the Sermon on the Mount (Matt.7.1-5) is typical of Anabaptism and foreign to the Calvinist penchant for close definition.
- 112 "Last Booke", p.754.                      113 *Ibid.*, p.755.
- 114 Matthew was the most often cited Bible book in *The Bright Morning Starre, A Paterne of True Prayer, Argumenta Contra Baptismum Infantum, and Propositions and conclusions*. Compare this to John Calvin. In the *Institutes* the most cited Bible books are Psalms 323 times, Rom. 295, John 249 and Matthew 211 (This is derived from "Table I", *op.cit.*, pp.v-xix).
- 115 "Prayer", p.157.
- 116 "Propositions and conclusions", #57,58,64,68,69,79,pp.743-7.
- 117 Cf. also "Paralleles", p.603. A word of caution must be added to this and any other discussion of Smyth's Anabaptist theology. Our understanding of it is based primarily on *The First Baptist Confession and Propositions and conclusions*. These were not issued under Smyth's name but were corporate statements by Smyth's congregation. We should not be misled by Smyth's publications into thinking that Smyth dominated his congregation thoroughly. His ecclesiology insisted that there be several equal ruling elders. The one account we have of the services in his church reveals that several men preached and says nothing about whether Smyth was the dominant preacher, or even one of the preachers at all (Burrage, II, pp.176-7). Hugh Bromhead, a prominent member of the congregation, was a former pastor (White, *op.cit.*, p.126), and another member, Thomas Pygott, was pastor of the congregation after Smyth died (Burrage, I, p.250). We should also take seriously the argument over whether Helwys or Smyth should be the one to rebaptize the congregation.
- Moreover, it is possible that these two confessions of faith represented compromise statements between the views of Smyth's congregation and those of the Waterlander Mennonite Church. The first statement is not signed.
- Even less reliable is what is taken to be Smyth's commentary on the Waterlander confession (*Defence of Ries' Confession*) but which in fact may not be. Some Anabaptist doctrines are confirmed in the *Argumenta Contra Baptismum Infantum*, but many others are not dealt with there. More important confirmation comes from Smyth's *Last Booke*, where several Anabaptist doctrines were confirmed, but again things are not perfectly clear. In fact, it was in this book that Smyth suggested that he did not really accept the Melchiorite Christology but that he would not refuse fellowship with someone over such a minor point ("*Last Booke*", pp.758-9). Although he must have accepted them generally, one is left wondering whether there are other "minor points" in the two English statements of faith that Smyth did not believe but merely went along with in order to seek fellowship with his Mennonite brothers.
- 118 Shantz can argue that the ruling Christ overshadows the church in *Propositions and conclusions* only by including the Holy Spirit in the concept of the ruling Christ, *op.cit.* p.202.
- 119 See Shantz, *op.cit.* p. 199.

- 120 See, for example, Kliever, op.cit., p.297.
- 121 Other possible sources are the Bible and the experience of the Marian exiles.
- 122 This is true with the exception of one rather recent "Father", Erasmus.
- 123 Burrage, op.cit., I, pp.242, 246-7.
- 124 "Last Booke", p.757.
- 125 One of the errors of Irwin Horst's article "England" in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* is that the Dutch Mennonites convinced Smyth to institute believers' baptism (Vol.II p.218). There are many more similar errors in N. van der Zijpp's article, "Smyth, John" in the same *Encyclopedia*.
- 126 See p.253 above. It might be suggested that Smyth's Calvinist theology in *The Character of the Beast* was assumed only for the sake of argument with a Calvinist, just as in the *Paralleles* Smyth did not mention believers' baptism although it is likely he already believed in it. (*The Character of the Beast* appeared in print only a few days after *Paralleles*). This argument is rather far-fetched - there is a big difference between not discussing a doctrine (in *Paralleles*) and assuming it to be true (in *The Character of the Beast*).
- 127 This is evident from their letter to the Waterlanders dated 12 March 1610. They cite the "good experience" they have had with the Waterlanders and "the great love and kindness" shown to them (Burrage, II, pp. 185-7).
- 128 Kliever, op.cit., p.311.
- 129 This is taken from the nineteen articles of faith sent by the Helwys group to the Waterlanders (Burrage, II, pp.182-4). On the basis of an earlier confession by the Helwys group, Kliever argues that there were great theological differences between Helwys and Smyth at this time (pp.311-315). However, when looking at the confessions they submitted to the Waterlanders, one is struck not by their differences but by their similarities. Certainly the second confession of Helwys is not just a Latin synopsis of his earlier confession as Kliever says but an entirely different confession. How Kliever makes this error is mystifying, unless again the language barrier has prevented him from reading the Latin confession. He cites Smyth's later works only in translation.
- 130 This combination seems to have remained with Baptists through later English and American history. Though staunch congregationalists, many Baptists freely joined Cromwell's state church. American Baptists similarly believe in a gathered church, Arminian theology and yet a "Christian" government.
- 131 Burrage, op.cit., II, p.181.      132 Ibid., p.185.
- 133 Ibid., pp.222ff.; Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, rev.ed., Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1950, 1963, p.40.
- 134 White, op.cit., p.163.