

# Transactions

of the

## Baptist Historical Society.

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### The Works of John Smyth.

IT is fitting that the *Transactions* should contain some notice of the most important literary event in the record of the Baptist Historical Society—the publication of the works of John Smyth. Dr. Whitley is to be heartily congratulated, both on the fulfilment of long-cherished hopes, and on the manner in which they have been fulfilled. The two handsome volumes just published through the Cambridge University Press are everything that could be desired, as the literary memorial of a spirit finely touched to fine issues, whose living monument is constituted by the Baptist Churches of to-day. For the first time, the whole works of the great pioneer are now made accessible, in accurate reproduction and attractive typography, to the student of Baptist origins. It may be confidently expected that, as a result of this publication, John Smyth will win a place in the history of religion in the seventeenth century which only a few have hitherto accorded to him.

The works, naturally printed in their chronological order, enable us to trace his whole development, through the Puritanism of his Lincoln lectureship (*The Bright Morning Starre*, and *A Paterne of True*

*Prayer*), the Separatism of Gainsborough and Amsterdam (*Principles and Inferences concerning the visible Church, The differences of the Churches of the Separation, and Paralleles, Censures, Observations*), the Baptist convictions that give him his denominational significance (*The Character of the Beast*, and various confessional statements), to that peace of God which guards his heart and thoughts in the closing period of his life (*Retractions and Confirmations*). The editor has increased our debt to him by prefixing a hundred-page biography of Smyth, and by adding an appendix of brief notes. The frontispieces to the two volumes are respectively an interesting map showing the position of Smyth's home in Amsterdam, and a photographic reproduction of the application made by Smyth and others for membership with the Mennonites, which is in his own hand-writing.

The chief contribution of the editor's biographical introduction consists partly in a careful presentation of the backgrounds to the successive phases of Smyth's career (notably the contemporary academic life of Cambridge, and the relations of religious communities in Amsterdam), and partly in the new emphasis placed on certain aspects of that career. These are, as the writer points out, the influence and significance of his university training, the consistency (in spite of all apparent inconsistency) of his development, and the importance of his influence. In this last connection, stress is laid on Smyth's predominant place in relation to John Robinson; Dr. Whitley suggests that the story of the Pilgrim Fathers will have to be re-written, in order to link them rather with Norfolk than with the Scrooby group: "What the Pilgrims derived from the north was their covenant; and its progressive character, the one thing that makes it memorable, is due to Smyth." This excellent biography will do much to reinforce the service rendered by the publication of the "Works."

Can we claim for these volumes a more general interest and significance than the furtherance of historical research? It must, of course, be frankly admitted that there is a good deal of material here which nobody but a professed student of Smyth's life and times would be likely to read, as is the case with the unattractive literary controversies included in the *Paralleles*, *Censures*, *Observations*. Life is too full of great and living interests for many of us to care whether John Smyth or Richard Bernard was the more logical in his syllogisms or ingenious in his Scriptural proofs, as to the ministry and worship of the Church. The tale may be full of sound and fury, but to most of us it will signify nothing. These are the ways of "dusty death," not because the problems have lost their importance, but because three centuries of history have given us new approaches to them. On the other hand, there is much in these volumes that deserves, for its own sake, to be more widely known. Even the long controversy about infant baptism with Richard Clifton, which forms the contents of *The Character of the Beast*, is an armoury of argument for the true meaning of baptism, which is by no means superseded. In spite of the attempts made by paedobaptists of the non-sacramentarian type to invent a defence of infant baptism which is true neither to the New Testament on the one hand, nor to the traditions and practice of the Church Catholic on the other, Smyth's alternatives must still be pressed by us: "The true constitution of the Church is of a new creature baptized into the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: the false constitution is of infants baptized." The paedobaptist, *so far as he takes his baptism of infants seriously*, is still in that position of unstable equilibrium which Smyth characterized when he wrote, "the Separation must either go back to England [i.e., the Anglican Church], or go forward to true baptism."

The false use made of the Old Testament covenant on behalf of infant baptism still calls for such denunciation as Smyth provides: "things must be made proportionable, and circumcision, which was a carnal seal, could not seal up the spiritual covenant to the spiritual seed, for to say so, is to leap over the hedge, and to make a disproportion betwixt the type and the truth."

We move, however, beyond the circle of our denominational interests when we turn to *A Paterne of True Prayer*. In view of the noticeable tendency amongst Free Churchmen of to-day towards some more liturgical form of public worship, there is much in this treatise that deserves to be pondered. Smyth's argument makes the Lord's Prayer the ground-plan or synopsis of all prayers: "there is no prayer in the holy Scripture but it may be referred unto this prayer: and all the prayers which have been, are, or shall be made, must be measured by this prayer, and so far forth are they commendable and acceptable as they are agreeable hereunto." Yet the mere repetition of this perfect form of words is valueless: "It is one thing to say the Lord's prayer, another thing to pray it." Wisely to build the house on this ground-plan is no light task, and it calls for earnest and diligent preparation: "it is our duty to strengthen our soul before prayer with premeditate matter: that our coming to pray and having our hearts filled with matter, we may better continue in prayer: for as a man that hath filled his belly with meat is better able to hold out at his labour than being fasting; even so, he that first replenisheth his soul with meditations of his own sins and wants, of God's judgements and blessings upon himself and others, shall be better furnished to continue longer in hearty and fervent prayer, than coming suddenly to pray without strengthening himself aforehand thereunto." In fact, Smyth links

the sermon and the prayer together, in a way that dignifies both: "there is no difference betwixt preaching and praying but this: that preaching is directed to men from God, prayer is directed from man to God, both preaching and prayer is the word of God, or ought to be so." Smyth is, however, sadly conscious how far our actual praying falls below this ideal of public prayer; for example, through wandering thoughts, "as about our dinner, our money, our cattle, our pleasures, our suits and adversaries [surely a personal touch], and a thousand of like quality: so that if our prayers were written as we conceive them, and our by-thoughts as parentheses interlaced, they would be so ridiculous as that we might very well be ashamed of them." Perhaps this is the best reason to be offered for breaking up the customary "long prayer" of our own services into a series of detached petitions with congregational responses.

The innermost sanctuary of Smyth's writings is, however, the *Retractions*, which form so fine an illustration of that Pauline phrase which John Stuart Blackie used to render, "truthing it in love." To read these eight or nine pages sympathetically is a devotional exercise, a true means of grace, nor is the devotional spirit at all checked by the touch of Pauline indignation at Helwys's unworthy imputation of selfish motives. There could be no more convincing proof of the genuine leading of the Spirit of God through the apparent inconsistencies of spiritual consistency, up to the Spirit's rarest fruit—peace. The writer of the *Retractions* has learnt to see life steadily, and see it whole, with his feet planted firmly on the common foundation of all Christian churches. He still condemns what he regards as unspiritual elements in the churches, wherever found, and holds fast to the essential convictions of his life; but he has penetrated to the inner brotherhood of all true Christians. The

measure of that penetration is given by his humble acknowledgment of regret for the spirit in which he has often censured others, and for his excessive insistence on the external features of Church life. "Without repentance, faith, remission of sin, and the new creature, there is no salvation, but there is salvation without the truth of all the outward ceremonies of the outward Church." Mark well that last phrase; there *is* a truth of outward ceremonies, as well as of inward spirit, and Smyth by no means abandons that truth, though he has come to see it in a new perspective. The supreme interest of John Smyth's life and writings lies in this spiritual development, so fitly crowned with peace. "My stress lay," says Browning in the preface to his most difficult poem, "on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study." That which *Sordello* labours heavily to portray, Smyth's works achieve, in the simplicity of a single-hearted devotion to spiritual truth. "That we should fall from the profession of Puritanism to Brownism, and from Brownism to true Christian baptism is not simply evil or reprobable in itself, except it be proved that we have fallen from true religion." The study of this pilgrimage on its inner side, now rendered possible to us all through the publication of these volumes, is full of fascination. In comparison with this, the interest of the outward circumstances of Smyth's life is secondary. "To certain types of mind," as Evelyn Underhill says in her preface to the autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, "the spiritual adventures of man will seem always the most absorbing of all studies; the most real amongst the confusing facts of life." Such minds should not miss this fine example of the quest of truth, none the less fine because it was carried through amid the practical religious needs and ecclesiastical controversies of

Smyth's own day. In some sense, Smyth is an epitome of the progressive religion of England during the seventeenth century; we may see in him a prophecy, not only of the movement from Puritanism to Separatism, but also of the spiritual emphasis which gives unity in diversity to the many religious groups of the Commonwealth. But the victorious peace of his last days does not correspond to the mere "toleration" in which the century ends; it was the deeper peace of loving and sympathetic insight, which is attained only through the spiritual baptism of the believer.

H. WHEELER ROBINSON.

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### **Obadiah Holmes of Seekonk.**

This man was one of the early Baptist confessors in New England. Benedict tells us that he arrived in America about 1639, and continued a communicant with the pedobaptists, first at Salem, and then at Rehoboth, about eleven years, when he became a Baptist, and subsequently united with the first church at Newport, Rhode Island. He was sent by the church to Lynn in Massachusetts, where he was arrested for being at worship in a private house, and in August 1651 was whipt thirty stripes with a three-corded whip. Soon afterwards he was chosen pastor at Newport, where he died in 1682. His son Obadiah was long a judge in New Jersey, and a preacher in the Baptist church of Cohansey. Another of his eight children, by name John, became a magistrate in Philadelphia; and his posterity is spread over the Middle States.

Such a fine record prompts enquiry for his English ancestry. Benedict says that he was a native of Preston in Lancashire, and that when he died in 1682 he was aged 76. It follows that he was born in 1606.

The registers of births at Preston for that period were extant in 1631, when an extract of 1604 was attested. Now the earliest book which survives covers 1611-1635. It records three christenings of Holmes, four marriages, and five burials. But there is no mention of Obadiah.