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The Establishment of the Baptists in England in the
Early Part of the Seventeenth Century

Eugenia Henderson
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History 391

In 1558 with the accession of a Protestant Queen on the throne, England had the appearance of religious freedom.¹ Around 1559 Dutch and Flemish dissenters emigrated to England bringing with them Baptist beliefs.² Elizabeth's religious policy, however, was not one of toleration. Not being a religious zealot, she desired a workable religious situation. As a result the Elizabethan Settlement was a compromise and came to mean no religious liberty but no inquisition. In 1559 Elizabeth became Supreme Governor of the Anglican Church in the Act of Supremacy. The Act of Uniformity passed in the same year forced the people to attend their parish churches under the threat of heavy penalties. This act, also, adopted the Book of Common Prayer of 1552.³ The main objections to this Settlement according to W. H. Burgess were the "restraint upon preaching, equivocal communion service of the "... Prayer book and the retention of the canon law inherited from Catholic times and enforced upon the clergy instead of the discipline of the New Testament."⁴ It is evident that the dissenters would not enjoy the freedom that they had anticipated under Elizabeth.

In the first years of her reign the Queen did protect the Dutch and Flemish emigrants, but later protests were brought against them.⁵ Therefore, the Queen herself being very intolerant of dissenters⁶ issued a royal proclamation in 1562 ordering all Baptists to leave England or suffer

"pain of punishment and loss of goods." ⁷ This was a blow not only to the emigrants, but also, to the English exiles who had returned to their native land from abroad hoping for liberty and peace. ⁸

Towards the end of Elizabeth's reign in 1595 the proclamation was reinforced. ⁹ It was said by one author that Elizabeth expelled more Baptists from her realm than any other English sovereign. ¹⁰ Whether this statement is absolutely correct it would be hard to prove. It is apparent though from several sources that the Baptists were a highly persecuted sect — more so than other separatists. B. Evans states that the Baptists were "detested by all, obnoxious to government, and hated by all religionists..." ¹¹ That the Baptist suffered for their beliefs is certain. This sect was considered a "tare ... in the Lord's field." ¹² The Puritans and the Church of England thought them to be heretics in denying the necessity or validity of infant baptism and referred to them as "infidels and atheists." ¹³ Archbishop Whitgift despised the Baptists ¹⁴ not only because of their belief about infant baptism, but also, because of their position regarding the place of the magistrate in spiritual affairs. They held that the king should not interfere "in ecclesiastical matters!" ¹⁵ One author sums up the oppression of the Baptists by saying, "If the martyrology of the Anabaptists was wrote, [sic] their sufferings would make a large volume." ¹⁶ This may, however, represent an exaggeration or overstatement of the facts, nevertheless, Baptists did endure pain in Elizabethan England.

Though persecuted the Baptists were a zealous religious group, and their influence was felt.¹⁷ However, according to W.K. Jordan there is little evidence "of any "organized Baptist congregation"¹⁸ during this time. Some Baptist communities prospered in Kent and Essex, and others holding Baptist beliefs were members of Brownists's Congregations.¹⁹ At the end of Elizabeth's reign many nonconformists, because of the order to leave the realm, left England and emigrated to Amsterdam, Holland.²⁰ Such was the case of Francis Johnson, who according to the Dictionary of National Biography, was a Presbyterian separatist.²¹ C. Burrage says rather that Johnson and his group of separatists composed the first Anabaptist company, but that information about this group is so "meagre and scattered" that they are not appreciated at their true value.²² There is evidence that this separatist congregation was in Holland in 1606 when John Smyth went to Amsterdam with his group from Gainsborough, Lincolnshire.²³ Burrage says that in an account written in 1600 by Enoch Clapham that the Johnsonian Anabaptists had a se-baptist in their company who baptized himself and then the rest although his identity is not certain.²⁴ This first se-baptist was English since Enoch Clapham knew him, and no Dutchman would baptize himself.²⁵ Whether he was the first to baptize himself can be questioned since other sources list John Smyth as the first. This point should not be dwelled upon, however, because John Smyth is by far the more important of the two in the establishment of the Baptists in England.

John Smyth was born in the first half of the sixteenth century²⁶ according to Henry Dexter in his biography of Smyth. Because of his common name, Smyth is easily confused with others. There is some disagreement among authors regarding the historical dates of Smyth's life, but Dexter is substantiated in his facts by the Dictionary of National Biography thus the dates he gives are probably the most reliable. There is no controversy that Smyth was well educated at Christ's College, Cambridge University and had as a tutor Francis Johnson, the separatist mentioned above. No doubt Smyth was influenced by him as to his future separatist beliefs. In 1571 Smyth matriculated at Christ's College as a "sizar" which meant that his parents did not have the means to send him to school. As a sizar he waited on the Fellows and ate after them at meals.²⁷ He received his B.A. degree in 1576; was chosen a fellow and received his M.A. degree in 1579.²⁸

As a member of the Anglican Church he took a position in 1600 as a lecturer to the city of Lincoln.²⁹ There is some dispute on this phase of his life—some authors stating that he was a preacher rather than a lecturer. The reason that A. C. Underwood gives for his being a lecturer seems valid. Smyth took the lectureship instead of a living so that he would not be forced into conformity by the bishop of the diocese.³⁰ Burgess supports Underwood by saying that Smyth was not the preacher, but only the "town lecturer" as confirmed by the Bishop's registry over the Exchequer Gates at Lincoln.³¹ Smyth was not incumbent here long; his position was revoked

in 1602 only a short while after it had been granted to him for life.³² There was much opposition to him at Lincoln. Smyth was outspoken and greatly angered the people there "by personal preaching."³³

After leaving the lectureship at Lincoln, Burgess states that it is difficult to trace Smyth's activities until his pastorate of the newly formed church at Gainsborough.³⁴ Even in 1605 Burrage declares that Smyth still considered himself a member of the Anglican Church. Smyth himself said, "I... confess that I am far from the opinion of them which separate from our Church...."³⁵ Before separating from the Church of England, he went through a period of about nine months of doubt and study.³⁶ During this stage in his life Smyth consulted several men — one being Arthur Hildersham. This clergyman in the Anglican Church suffered persecution because he would not conform "to all the forms and ceremonies of the Church of which he was a minister."³⁷ In giving advice to Smyth, he said that it was not lawful to withdraw from the true Anglican Church even though it was corrupt.³⁸ His arguments did not satisfy Smyth who "became convinced that it was incumbent upon the faithful to withdraw from even a true Church when it was corrupt in its ministry and its form of worship."³⁹ Therefore, having received no fulfillment from Hildersham or Masters Barbon and Dod, other ministers whom he consulted, Smyth "shortly... became a Separatist."⁴⁰ It is obvious that he made this decision to separate "not without the fullest considerations"⁴¹ and admits that he "was dis-

tracted to and fro' before he saw the truth cleared to his judgement and conscience."⁴²

During this period in Smyth's life, he lived in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, where he was surrounded by a large number of nonconformists or separatists.⁴³ After he made his decision to separate, Smyth in 1606 joined one part of a Congregational Church there which had split for convenience.⁴⁴ The other part was located in Scrooby under the leadership of Richard Clyfton. Sometime in 1606 these two groups together had organized a Separatist Church and joined themselves together by a covenant.⁴⁵ In the main clause the people pledged themselves "to walk in all his God's ways made known, or to be made known unto them...."⁴⁶ This was a practical covenant—"...it had an immediate bearing upon life, and a hopeful forward look for further light from God."⁴⁷ Because of distance the newly formed church split forming the two congregations mentioned above. Smyth became pastor of the group in Gainsborough.⁴⁸

Forming this church "according to the New Testament pattern"⁴⁹ gave these people a sense of satisfaction, but at the same time caused "them...difficulties with the world and with the ecclesiastical authorities."⁵⁰ With the accession of James I to the throne, the nonconformists and separatists thought that he would be a "sympathizing judge"⁵¹ to their claims because of his Presbyterian background and because of his condemnation of the Anglican Church.⁵² Instead at the Hampton Court Conference in 1604, James, acting

as a judge between the Puritans and Anglicans ended the conference "by threatening to 'make the Puritans conform, or else harry them out of the land.'"⁵³ As a result of this many Puritans were forced to leave their livings. The separatists were being persecuted by "the ecclesiastical authorities for breaking the law of attendance at public worship."⁵⁴ This law passed in 1593 under Elizabeth was reinstated in the first year of James's reign. It designated that "absense from one's parish church for a month, or attendance at any unauthorized assembly or meeting under color or pretence of any exercise of religion; rendered one liable to conviction and imprisonment without bail."⁵⁵ If the convicted person did not conform within three months, he had to leave the realm and "go into perpetual banishment."⁵⁶ The congregations became "marked" for persecution since they did not attend "the services and communion at their parish churches."⁵⁷ They could not remain undetected long. Their houses were watched, some were arrested and fined.⁵⁸ The High Commission Court was used against them.⁵⁹ In fact abuses against them became so severe that many separatists were forced to leave England.⁶⁰ Thus was the course that was taken by the congregations of John Smyth and Richard Clyfton.

Enoch Clapham writing in 1608 "takes notice of them [dissenters] flying out of their own nation, to plant a church among a people of another language;" others he said "remained in England...leaving the public assemblies, and running into woods and meadows, and meeting in bye stables, barns, and haylofts for services."⁶¹

The group of dissenters important to the establishment of the Baptists in England chose to emigrate to Holland. Surely some with Baptist views remained in England, but they are not pertinent at this time. The two congregations although separated by distance and maintaining a few disagreements as to church doctrine remained close, and when the times became unbearable decided to go together to the "Low Countries where they heard was freedom of religion for all men."⁶² The Dictionary of National Biography, however, states that the two groups did not emigrate to Holland in the same year. Smyth and his followers went over in 1606. Clyfton and some members of the Scrooby congregation left England in 1608. followed by John Robinson later in the same year.⁶³ John Robinson like Smyth was educated at Cambridge and separated from the Anglican Church. He joined the church at Scrooby, Nottinghamshire and became Clyfton's assistant minister.⁶⁴

The latter two men upon their arrival in Amsterdam, joined the separatist church there. This church having Francis Johnson as its pastor and Henry Ainsworth as its teacher had been founded in 1595. From the beginning it had endured hardships and trials but "had now grown to a considerable size...."⁶⁵ Later in 1609 Robinson moved to Leyden; he was ordained there as pastor and in 1620 served as the pastor for the Pilgrims who migrated in that year to America.⁶⁶ Though he was considered, even during his life time, as a "divine of considerable note,"⁶⁷ he played no

great part in the establishment of the Baptists in England. Clyfton remained in Amsterdam as a member of Francis Johnson's church and in December 1610, received the position of teacher of that congregation upon Ainsworth's secession.⁶⁸ In Amsterdam Clyfton involved himself in many bitter controversies especially with John Smyth. Clyfton "renounced the principles of rigid separation"⁶⁹ which Smyth advocated. Both Robinson and Clyfton were men of importance, but neither played a significant role in Baptist history.

The main protagonists in the development of Baptist ideas in England were John Smyth and Thomas Helwys. John Murton, also, though not as outstanding as the other two was important. Helwys and Murton were both prominent members of the Gainsborough Church.⁷⁰ Helwys was a man of good family background and training.⁷¹ He was educated at Gray's Inn in London receiving "a general rather than a legal education."⁷² His father was a staunch protestant of gentry status. Upon his death in 1590 Thomas "stepped into his father's place as a leading country gentleman...."⁷³ Because of his social position Helwys had to make many sacrifices owing to his religious convictions.⁷⁴ He developed a friendship with John Smyth by caring for him through a serious illness at Broxtowe Hall, Nottinghamshire, Helwys's home.⁷⁵ John Murton, the other leader, was from Gainsborough and was a furrier by profession.⁷⁶ Both of these men were among those who emigrated to Holland with Smyth. In fact it was Thomas who initiated the idea to leave England to escape

persecution,⁷⁷ and he was the "well-to-do member of the Church" who financed the journey.⁷⁸

Burgess states that there was not much written at the time about this voyage yet it was a topic of conversation in the localities.⁷⁹ The realization that so many people had left drew attention to the episode. In addition, the fact that the Scrooby group encountered difficulties in trying to sail caused people to be sympathetic to their cause. Their leaving naturally affected those who were well acquainted with the persons emigrating; it, also, made quite an impression on the Puritans who were interested in church reform.⁸⁰ This journey was very important in Baptist history, however small the influence and impact it had on those Gainsborough and Scrooby communities.

When Smyth and his group arrived in Amsterdam, they formed the second English church there. It is agreed upon by the more reliable Baptist writers such as Dexter, Burgess, and Burrage that Smyth's congregation did not join the Congregational or Barrowist Church as Clyfton and Robinson did. Rather they "maintained a separate existence," but "at first, the members of Smyth's and Johnson's companies appear to have been in communion with one another."⁸¹

Smyth felt that he could not join with the "ancient" church because he did not approve "of [the] order of worship or [the] method of [church] government"⁸² in that church. Smyth's main argument at this time for upholding a separate identity seems to be the feeling that he had about using

scriptural translations in worship. He believed that only Greek and Hebrew originals should be used by the minister.⁸³ Smyth felt that a preacher should not use any notes in delivering his sermon⁸⁴ since "'worship ... is spiritual'" and should come from the heart.⁸⁵ Smyth states this idea in his tract "The Differences of the Churches of the Separation". Dexter quotes passages from this work to show how strongly Smyth felt about using no books in worship. Not only did Smyth disapprove of the minister using notes, but he, also, said that "'it was unlawful to have the book before the eye in time of singing a psalm'"⁸⁶ — this being one aspect of the worship service.

Another reason Smyth gave for his refusal to unite with the Congregational Church was that he disapproved of the way in which the Church was governed. He thought Johnson and Ainsworth "gave" undue authority to the presbytery" when the power of running the church should reside with every member and not so much in the officers.⁸⁷ Johnson and Ainsworth believed that Christ had "ordained a Presbytery... to teach and rule the church...."⁸⁸ This view was in opposition to Smyth's who interpreted the New Testament as saying that Christ gave power to the "'whole church'".⁸⁹ Although these differences prevented Smyth from uniting with Johnson's congregation, Smyth did not at this time completely separate any communion with the first English Church in Amsterdam.⁹⁰

Smyth was well received in Amsterdam, and according to T. Crosby the first Baptist historian, Smyth "was esteemed

for his piety and learning [and] ... was accounted one of the grandees of the separation."⁹¹ Afterwards, however, Crosby states that Smyth began to have beliefs so differing from his associates that many opposed him.⁹²

In searching for the true religion Smyth was always frank in his statements, and one readily admires him for his courage to present and defend his convictions. Probably his most obvious deviation from other separatists was his repudiation of infant baptism, and his acceptance of baptism for believers only. Smyth felt that baptism as it had previously been practiced was wrong in the following two ways: first, "'... [baptism] had descended to them from ... a false church.'" He explained this by saying that the separatists had split from the Church of England but had not given up their "baptism of that church; which ... was none other than the very baptism of Rome which they regarded as the Mother of Harlots...."⁹³ and second, "'... true baptism [was] to be administered upon persons confessing their faith and their sins.'" Therefore, because infants could not confess the above they should not be baptized; moreover, since his followers had received baptism in infancy they were still without it.⁹⁴

Besides this belief in baptism, Smyth, Helwys, and others renounced Calvinism and took up the Arminian doctrine.⁹⁵ That is to say they adopted the idea of salvation for all and rejected the Calvinists's "doctrines of reprobation and election."⁹⁶ These views of Smyth did not pass unnoticed; books and tracts were written against him and his

principles. The very men who had fled to Holland to enjoy religious freedom now "persecuted Mr. Smyth with the most virulent rancour;...[they] endeavoured to tender both his person and his doctrine the object of general abhorrence."⁹⁷

Because, however, the tracts were written with so much prejudice they tended to defeat their purpose and discredited what they said.⁹⁸ Smyth defended himself against their charges especially that of his "fickleness" by saying:

It may be thought most strange, that a man should oftentimes change his religion; and it cannot be accounted a commendable quality in any man to make many alterations and changes in such weighty matters as are cases of conscience. This [is].. true...if one condition be admitted, that the religion which a man changeth be the truth. For, otherwise, to change a false religion is commendable, and to retain a false religion is damnable. So that, to change religion is not evil simply,...except that it can be proved that we have fallen from true religion.⁹⁹

Hence their words condemning him did not dissuade him from his "search for truth"¹⁰⁰ rather he gained courage and came to adopt Baptist beliefs.

Smyth was probably influenced to become a Baptist by both Dutch Mennonites and those English "who had become Anabaptists in Holland before his arrival [there]."¹⁰¹ His own inquiry and study of the scriptures apparently served to convince him as much as anything else that his view concerning baptism was right. These factors combined to play a role in his decision to become a Baptist. He made this resolution sometime prior to March 14, 1609, because on this date Clyfton replied to Smyth's two propositions on baptism — those declaring that "infants aree

not to be baptized" and "antichristians converted are to be admitted into the true church by baptism."¹⁰² Clyfton defended infant baptism saying that it was "'utterly unlawful' to re-baptize 'such as have been formerly baptized in the Apostate Churches of Christians.'"¹⁰³ Even though criticized "Smyth's opinions prevailed ... and he soon had proselytes enough to form a distinct church...."¹⁰⁴

The new church was founded by Smyth, Helwys, Murton, and thirty-six others practicing Smyth's belief in baptism.¹⁰⁵ Smyth believed that it was scripturally possible to establish a new church through baptism.¹⁰⁶ There was a question with respect to administering baptism. One possibility was to seek Mennonite assistance, but Dexter gives four reasons why Smyth and his company did not apply to the Dutch Mennonites to administer the rite. These were the following: 1) the English group did not desire to add to their unpopularity by seeking Dutch anabaptism, 2) theologically they differed with the Mennonites, 3) they did not wish to feel obligated to have to become members of the Mennonite Church, and 4) language was an obstacle.¹⁰⁷ It is certain that the Mennonites did not baptize the company. Instead John Smyth took it upon himself to administer the rite on himself, and then baptized the rest of the group. In this way they established the first English Baptist Church "though not on English soil."¹⁰⁸ Thus was founded a "scriptural church [consisting] of the regenerate only, who [were] baptized on a personal confession of faith."¹⁰⁹

There is some dispute as to whether Smyth actually baptized himself or whether he was baptized by Thomas Helwys. There is, also, a question of the mode of Smyth's baptism — if by immersion or affusion. The majority of the writers and the most reliable such as W.T. Whitley, Dexter, Burrage, and Burgess declare that Smyth did baptize himself by affusion rather than immersion. Dexter gives three reasons that Smyth was a se-baptist. The first is that there is proof in Smyth's own handwriting; Dexter is supported in this statement by another Baptist historian Henry C. Vedder. The second is an affirmation by John Robinson, also, appearing in Burrage's book on English dissenters. John Robinson stated, "'... Mr. Smyth baptized first himself, and next Mr. Helwys, and so the rest....'" The third evidence comes from "Lubbert Gerrits, a Mennonite minister, writing ... in 1610, referring to this case of Smyth, calls it 'the act of baptizing by which he had baptized himself.'"¹¹⁰

Criticized by many for taking such a course, Smyth defends his self-baptism in "The Character of the Beast" by saying:

Now for baptizing a man's self there is as good warrant, as for a man churching himself. For two men singly are no church, jointly they are a church, and they both of them put a church upon themselves, so may two men put baptism upon themselves. For as both persons unchurched, yet have power to assume the church each of them for himself with others in communion. So each of them unbaptized hath power to assume baptism for himself in communion: and as Abraham, and John the Baptist ... did administer the sacrament upon themselves: so may any man ... in the recovering of the church by baptism, administer it upon himself in communion with others.¹¹¹

The mode of Smyth's baptism was most certainly that of affusion. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries "the method of baptizing then nearly universal was by pouring or sprinkling."¹¹² It was practiced both by the English Independents and the Dutch Mennonites.¹¹³ It is further verified that Smyth used affusion by the later dissatisfaction of Smyth in applying for membership in the Mennonite Church. The Mennonites in reviewing his application, found that the "form" of Smyth's baptism was no different from theirs.¹¹⁴ The conclusion can be drawn that Smyth was a se-Baptist by affusion. By baptizing himself and then the others, he established the first English Baptist Church, and from hence has been considered the "founder of modern Baptist Churches."¹¹⁵

The information about the first English Baptist Church is not great. It is certain that its theology was Arminian. Their doctrines held that the church contained baptized believers only, and that only those persons who had been baptized could partake of the Lord's supper. In addition they believed that the magistrate should not interfere with a person's religion.¹¹⁶

Burrage gives an account of the order of worship of Smyth's congregation. Their worship began with a prayer, and the service lasted from 8 A.M. until 12 noon and from 2 P.M. until 6 P.M.. The scriptures were read, and afterwards set aside. The preacher then expounded on something

from the scriptures for forty-five minutes to an hour. Next a second speaker prophesied from the same text about the same length of time. Several more speakers followed him as time permitted. At the conclusion the first speaker prayed, and a collection was taken for the poor. The government of the church was deliberated at the end of the service.¹¹⁷

Little is written about the people who were members and took part in the worship. Burgess tells of a letter written by Hugh and Ann Bromehead, a couple who had emigrated to Holland with John Smyth. Bromehead and his wife were from Nottinghamshire and were said by the author to be "comfortably provided for ..." ¹¹⁸ so presumably they would have been of the lower or middle gentry class. Whether the whole congregation was of this class cannot be proved, but it seems that they would have had to be people of some means to leave England and emigrate to a new country.

Principles that this church was founded upon are expressed in the Confessions of Faith. "A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining in Amsterdam" written in 1611 is considered "the earliest Baptist confession." ¹¹⁹ Helwys it is certain had a principle part in writing it because he made a statement in a work later that same year to the effect that he had had a hand in writing the treatise "A Declaration..." ¹²⁰ Smyth most probably assisted Helwys in the composition. To this confession of twenty-seven articles, forty-two people

affixed their signatures. This confession repudiates predestination saying in Article V that "... God hath not predestinated men to be damned... for God would have all men saved...."¹²¹ Articles X through XIV deal with the "constitution of the church and the ordinances."¹²² In Article X the "Church of Christ" is described as:

A company of faithful people, separated from the world by the word and spirit of God, being knit unto the Lord, and one another, by baptism, upon their own confession of their faith and sins.¹²³

Articles XIII and XIV deal with church membership and baptism. Article XIII states:

Every church is to receive ... all their members by baptism, upon the confession of their faith and sins wrought by the preaching of the gospel, according to the primitive institution and practice. ... any church constituted after any other manner, or of any person, is not according to Christ's Testament.¹²⁴

Article XIV defines baptism as "the outward manifestation of dying into sin, and walking in newness of life; and therefore, in nowise appertaineth to infants."¹²⁵ These articles show the emphasis placed on the New Testament especially that their faith be in accordance with it.

There were four other confessions that were produced out of a dispute between John Smyth and Thomas Helwys and John Murton. Smyth and Helwys had up until the year 1610 been extremely close. Helwys was known as Smyth's "right-hand man". When, however, Smyth applied for membership in a Dutch Mennonite congregation, Helwys and Murton and approximately six or eight others refused to join him.¹²⁶

This decision of Smyth's probably came about because of Mennonite influence¹²⁷ and because of his constant search after truth. Smyth came to feel that he had been too hasty and wrong in baptizing himself. He now considered the Mennonites as the "true church ... [with] a true baptism."¹²⁸ Therefore, he desired union with them. Smyth and the majority of his congregation "renounced the baptism they had assumed for themselves and applied for admission..."¹²⁹ to the Mennonite Church. Helwys and Murton did not want membership in the Dutch church because they could see the difference between Mennonite and Baptist views. Therefore, they excommunicated Smyth and his followers and wrote a Confession to the Mennonites so they would not confuse them with Smyth and the others who wanted to join.

The Mennonites were dubious about whether to admit Smyth and his followers and made him write certain confessions concerning his doctrinal beliefs.¹³⁰ John Smyth prepared one confession consisting of twenty articles "to meet the Mennonite inquiry."¹³¹ A second was written by a Mennonite minister Hans de Ries and was accepted and signed by Smyth and forty-one others. It was drawn up to be submitted to various Mennonite churches in order that they may give an opinion as to whether the Baptists should be admitted into the Mennonite church. Because it was written in accordance with Mennonite beliefs, it was probably not a true picture of what the majority of English Baptists believed.¹³² In Helwys's confession of twenty-six articles

"he placed the creed of himself and his company before the Mennonites."¹³³ There may have been other confessions written at this time. All of the above were written in the Netherlands, but their exact dates are lacking. Some weren't published and probably none had a very wide circulation since the group of Baptists at this time was not large.¹³⁴

The split between Helwys and Smyth, which produced these confessions, showed the differences in belief of the two men. One major point of disagreement was "their own act of assuming baptism for themselves...."¹³⁵ Helwys "felt that he and his friends had ... recovered the truth, and set themselves in true church order by assuming baptism, and it was folly on the part of his old leader to topple the whole edifice again."¹³⁶ It is evident that he did not think as Smyth did that they had acted too hastily in their baptism. Furthermore they differed in other areas. Helwys defended Christians taking oaths; Smyth disagreed with him. In Smyth's last Confession of Faith in Article LXXXVI he stated that members of the church "are to judge all their causes of differences among themselves, and they are not to go to law, ... and that all their differences must be ended by (yea) and (nay) without an oath."¹³⁷ Another point of dispute was the membership of the magistrate in the "true church". Helwys said "'That magistracy being an holy ordinance of God, debarreth not from being of the Church of Christ.'"¹³⁸ Smyth on the other hand did not believe

that magistrates should be members of Christ's Church.

Because of these disagreements which caused the "unhappy condition of the Amsterdam Church,"¹³⁹ Helwys and Murton and a few others went back to England in 1611 or 1612. They risked their lives to return to their homeland, but they went back thinking that to remain in a foreign country was cowardly and remembering those of their sect who had remained in England without a leader.¹⁴⁰ They looked to London as their home and "the place of their future residence."¹⁴¹

At this same time in Amsterdam Smyth and his followers were refused acceptance into the Mennonite fellowship. Then "he and his little congregation took refuge in a room at the back of the 'great cake-house' or bakery belonging to [a kindly Mennonite] Jan Munter."¹⁴² By 1615, however, these people who had remained in Holland had been admitted into the Dutch church.¹⁴³ Their leader John Smyth did not live to see his congregation accepted. In August of 1612, "he was taken with his last illness, and after lingering in prostration through several weeks, he died of consumption."¹⁴⁴

By the end of his life Smyth's views had changed, and his last writings reveal a move toward an "unusual spirit of tolerance."¹⁴⁵ He had found that it is not so important to emphasize "the outward church and ceremonies; and that differences in belief should not cause one to disassociate with 'any penitent and faithful Christian whatsoever' — [this being] a remarkably enlightened statement for his day."¹⁴⁶

Smyth must be admired as a man of strong faith and courage, but as one author said, "His work was of capital importance; it has never been adequately recognized."¹⁴⁷ Dexter in his biography of Smyth speaks of him as "an impulsive man, with something magnetic ... strongly attaching his friends to himself; ... a good preacher, and a scholar of considerable acquirements."¹⁴⁸ To say he had no faults would be an error. That he lacked stability is evident. He was constantly unsettled as to "the relation of his perception and volitions to the data on which ... purposes stand."¹⁴⁹ However fickle he seemed at times to be John Smyth spoke out against persecution saying it was a "sin"¹⁵⁰ and defended religious toleration. In his last Confession of Faith Smyth said that "the magistrate is not ... to meddle with religion ... to force men to this or that form of religion or doctrine; but to leave Christian religion free to every man's conscience."¹⁵¹ Jordan probably summed up Smyth's worth accurately by saying that because he "advanced so rapidly in his views that he was never able to effect a lasting church organization or to formulate a comprehensive doctrinal system. His teachings are of profound importance to the historian of toleration, but it remained for others to give the English Baptists a systematic constitution."¹⁵²

Those who succeeded Smyth had gone back to England. Upon returning Helwys, Murton, and their followers worshipped in secrecy since at the time of their return persecution was on the upswing.¹⁵³ Not only were the Baptists

persecuted by the government, but also because of their "distinguishing rite [believer's baptism], they were frequently persecuted by the Reformers themselves."¹⁵⁴ The King was the one, however, who "dishonored his crown and the professed Protestantism of his country, by renewing the flaws of martyrdom, and committing to stake two of his own subjects."¹⁵⁵ Although this statement seems somewhat biased against James I, the killing of Bartholomew Legate and Edward Wightman showed the anti-toleration spirit in England. Wightman from Burton-on-Trent was burned at the stake on April 11, 1612; Legate was burned at Smithfield earlier that same year. The charges against Wightman prove that he was a Baptist. There is no such surety as to Legate's denomination other than that he had adopted a religion differing from the king's. It was said against Wightman that "he regarded 'the baptizing of infants as an abominable custom, and that the Lord's Supper and Baptism are not to be celebrated as they are now practiced in the Church of England.'"¹⁵⁶ Even though Wightman was the last man put to death in England for his religious beliefs, this, however, was not the end of all persecution.¹⁵⁷

Despite this attitude toward the Baptists, Helwys and his group established the first Baptist church in England in Spitalfield outside of London in 1612.¹⁵⁸ Here they "worshipped" as publicly as the evils of the time would permit."¹⁵⁹ This was a general Baptist church holding Arminian views that Christ died for all men.¹⁶⁰ It is described heroically by

A.C. Underwood in his Baptist history as a "church led and officered by laymen. It had been tested by the trials of exiles and the fires of controversy. It was deprived almost at once of its chief leaders by imprisonment, but it still held together."¹⁶¹ Jordan says that Helwys was "courting martyrdom" when he established a Baptist church in London "in the face of governmental opposition."¹⁶²

Knowing the vehemence of the King against his sect did not stop Helwys from writing and publishing "A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity" which was the first appeal for freedom of worship in the English language. In an introduction to this tract Dr. Wheeler Robinson gives four reasons for its importance. The first is that it "throws light on religious conditions and controversies in England."¹⁶³ It is valuable, too, for "its human interest" and for "its defense of the distinctive position of the first Baptist church in England,"¹⁶⁴ Lastly, Dr. Robinson states its worthiness in its "insistence, for the first time in England, on the right of universal religious liberty."¹⁶⁵

Helwys justifies the foundation of the Baptist church by using as the basis of his argument two articles (XIII and XIV) found in a Confession written by John Smyth. In essence saying that the true church of Christ is a group of baptized believers who have confessed their faith in Christ and that baptism does not belong to infants.¹⁶⁶ Because of this "distinctive doctrine of baptism" the Baptist Church emerged "from the ranks of the Separatists."¹⁶⁷

Besides defending the establishment of his own sect, Helwys demanded religious liberty for all dissenters by saying:

... for our lord the king is but an earthly king, and he hath no authority as a king but in earthly causes, and if the king's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws made by the king, our lord the king can require no more: for men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the king shall not answer for it neither may the king be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever it apperteynes not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.¹⁶⁸

In this statement as Robinson points out Helwys was very much ahead of his time in advocating religious liberty for all.¹⁶⁹

In his dedication to the King at the beginning of the tract, Helwys declares that "he [James I] had indeed absolute power over the goods and bodies of his subjects, but not over their conscience^(s) in matters of religion."¹⁷⁰ Because of these words and the tract itself, Helwys was put into Newgate prison. Helwys probably thought that with the means and influence of two of his relatives in London, he would receive some protection against the crown. However, "the authorities acted quickly" and neither his uncle Geoffrey Helwys, a wealthy merchant, nor his cousin Gervase Helwys, the Lieutenant of the Tower of London, could offer him any assistance.¹⁷¹ Helwys and his followers while imprisoned wrote a petition to Parliament in 1614 asking that body for liberty for the Baptists. The petition

stated that "they were loyal and obedient subjects. They presented that their imprisonment was for conscience sake."¹⁷² Parliament was not moved by their pleas and refused to accept their request.

After his imprisonment not much was heard of Helwys. He died sometime before or during 1616 because his uncle Geoffrey made a provision in his will dated in 1616 for Joan Helwys, widow of Thomas Helwys.¹⁷³ Helwys, "a man of earnest faith ..." ¹⁷⁴ died, but the Baptist Church at Spitalfield that he had founded continued under the leadership of John Murton. Murton is described by Jordan as a man who "displayed rare qualities of patience and perseverance and was able to hold his congregation together during a period of repression which did not begin to relax until about 1620."¹⁷⁵ He wrote tracts defending Baptist principles and advocating religious liberty.

In one of these tracts "Persecution for Religion Judged and Condemned" Murton stated in "The Epistle" preceding the work that the purpose of the writing was to show "that no man ought to be persecuted for his religion, be it true or false, so they testify their faithful allegiance to the King."¹⁷⁶ The tract was written in the form of a dialogue between Christian and Antichristian. This manner was used according to Murton "for the understanding of the simple ..." and "because all the objections ... [that had been met by them] might be set down, and the plainlier answered."¹⁷⁷

J.M. Cramp in his appraisal of the tract said that "the argument against persecution [was] handled in a masterly manner, and it is observed that the author takes the most liberal position."¹⁷⁸ In the course of the argument Christian says, "... none ought nor can be compelled to worship God ... by any worldly means [punishment] whatsoever."¹⁷⁹ At a point in the conversation an indifferent man saying that he had been listening to the discussion acknowledges the truth in Christian's statement.¹⁸⁰ Murton makes his point and "avows his abhorrence of all persecution, and would grant religious freedom even to the Papists."¹⁸¹

This idea of tolerance for all sects was probably among the greatest contributions of Baptists to ecclesiastical history. Jordan states that the Baptists advocated toleration because of their emphasis on the right of every man to judge for himself the religion that was right for him.¹⁸² The Baptists are considered by one author to be the "one form of Protestantism ... more nearly than any other, ... [to adopt] the great principle that it is the right of everyman to seek God's truth in the scriptures and mould his life in accordance with that truth as he sees it."¹⁸³ Thus Baptists are rightly esteemed the "champions of religious liberty"¹⁸⁴ because they endured many hardships to maintain this and another doctrine that no earthly magistrate had control over a man's conscience.¹⁸⁵

That they suffered is obvious from their own words:

It was not uncommon to be many years in filthly

prisons; in hunger, cold, and idleness; divided from wife, family, and calling; left in continual miseries and temptations, so that death itself would be to many less punishment.¹⁸⁶

They endured this pain for their beliefs not only that of religious freedom, but also because of the conviction they held that all men could be saved. They had broken away for the Calvinist doctrine of election and felt that "no man was irretrievably lost."¹⁸⁷ The Baptists thought that the lost should be won to Christ and, therefore, "were the most evangelical of all the major Protestant sects."¹⁸⁸ This idea is presented by Murton in his "Dialogue". Christian justifies the principle of preaching and publishing the gospel by saying that "that worthy apostle Paul, preached this gospel night and day"¹⁸⁹

Holding these views the Baptists set themselves apart from other sects. By 1615 when Murton's "Dialogue" was published the Baptist sect had become established in England. The leadership that this sect had had in men such as Smyth, Helwys, and Murton was excellent. These three men were essential in laying the foundation for the Baptists in England. Burgess commends them by saying:

... religion was their supreme interest in life, and religious motives controlled and determined their general action. Within a brief space of six years they separated from the Church of England, formed a distinct religious society, fled from persecution to Amsterdam, advanced to the opinion that baptism as administered in the Anglican Church was unlawful, and reconstituted their church by a fresh baptism.¹⁹⁰

Footnotes

¹B. Evans, The Early English Baptists (London, 1862-1864), I, 149.

²W. K. Jordan, The Development of Religious Toleration (Cambridge, 1932), I, 295.

³A. C. Underwood, A History of the English Baptists (London, 1947), p. 30.

⁴W. H. Burgess, John Smyth, the Se-Baptist, Thomas Helwys and the First Baptist Church in England with Fresh Light upon the Pilgrim's Father's Church (London, 1911), p. 25.

⁵Jordan, I., p. 295-296.

⁶Richard B. Cook, The Story of the Baptists in All Ages and Countries (Baltimore, 1884), p. 81.

⁷J. J. Goadby, Bye-paths in Baptist History: A Collection of Interesting, Instructive, and Curious Information, Not Generally Known Concerning the Baptist Denomination (New York, 1871), p. 78.

⁸Ibid.

⁹G. H. Orchard, A History of the Baptists in England (Nashville, 1860), p. 239.

¹⁰Goadby, p. 79.

¹¹Evans, p. 149.

¹²Ibid., p. 148.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 167.

¹⁵Jordan, I., p. 296.

¹⁶Orchard, p. 239.

¹⁷Evans, pp. 171; 147.

¹⁸Jordan, I., p. 295.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰David Benedict, A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World (New York, 1848), p. 327.

²¹"Johnson, Francis," Dictionary of National Biography, 1917, X, p. 897.

²²C. Burrage, Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research (Cambridge, 1912), I, 222.

²³"Smyth, John," Dictionary of National Biography, 1917, XVIII, p. 898.

²⁴Burrage, p. 223.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Henry Martin Dexter, John Smyth (Boston, 1881), p. 1.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Underwood, p. 34.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Burgess, p. 62.

³²Ibid., p. 51.

³³Burrage, p. 228.

³⁴Burgess, p. 63.

³⁵Burrage, p. 228.

³⁶Dexter, p. 1.

³⁷Burgess, pp. 68-69.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 70-71.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 69-70.

⁴⁰Burrage, p. 229.

⁴¹Burgess, p. 66.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Adam Taylor, The History of English General Baptists (London, 1818), I, p. 66.

⁴⁴Robert G. Torbet, A History of the Baptists (Philadelphia, 1950), p. 63.

⁴⁵Burrage, pp. 230-231.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 230.

⁴⁷Burgess, pp. 87-88.

⁴⁸Burrage, p. 231.

⁴⁹Burgess, pp. 93-94.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Evans, p. 182.

⁵²Ibid., pp. 182-183.

⁵³Underwood, p. 33.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Burgess, pp. 94-95.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 93-94.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 94.

⁵⁹Taylor, I, p. 66.

⁶⁰Henry C. Vedder, A Short History of the Baptists (Philadelphia, 1907), p. 202.

⁶¹T. Crosby, The History of English Baptists from the Reformation to the Beginning of the Reign of King George I (London, 1738-1740), I, p. 88.

⁶²Burrage, p. 231.

⁶³"Robinson, John," Dictionary of National Biography, 1917, XVII, p. 19.

⁶⁴Ibid., pp. 18-19

⁶⁵Dexter, p. 2.

⁶⁶"Robinson, John," p. 19.

⁶⁷Taylor, I, p. 67.

⁶⁸"Clifton, Richard," Dictionary of National Biography, 1917, IV, p. 544.

⁶⁹Ibid.

- 70 Vedder, p. 202.
- 71 Torbet, p. 66.
- 72 Thomas Helwys, A Mystery of Iniquity (London, 1935), pp. VIII-IX.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Burgess, p. 115.
- 75 Helwys, pp. VIII-IX.
- 76 Underwood, p. 24.
- 77 Vedder, p. 202.
- 78 Underwood, p. 24.
- 79 Burgess, p. 117.
- 80 Ibid.
- 81 Burrage, p. 232.
- 82 Burgess, p. 120.
- 83 W. K. Jordan, The Development of Religious Toleration (Cambridge, 1936), II, p. 263.
- 84 Torbet, p. 64.
- 85 Dexter, p. 8.
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Burgess, p. 120.
- 88 Ibid., pp. 136-137.
- 89 Ibid.
- 90 Dexter, p. 8.
- 91 Crosby, I, p. 91.
- 92 Ibid.
- 93 Dexter, pp. 26-27.
- 94 Ibid.
- 95 Evans, p. 202.
- 96 Burgess, p. 177.
- 97 Taylor, I, p. 69.

- ⁹⁸Crosby, I, p. 92.
- ⁹⁹Coadby, pp. 32-33.
- ¹⁰⁰Taylor, I, p. 68.
- ¹⁰¹Burgess, p. 147.
- ¹⁰²Ibid., pp. 148-151.
- ¹⁰³Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁴Crosby, I, p. 94.
- ¹⁰⁵T. Armitage, A History of the Baotists: Traced by their Vital Principles and Practices, from the Time of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to the Year 1886 (New York, 1886), p. 453.
- ¹⁰⁶Dexter, p. 27.
- ¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 28.
- ¹⁰⁸Underwood, p. 38.
- ¹⁰⁹Vedder, p. 203.
- ¹¹⁰Dexter, pp. 31-33.
- ¹¹¹Burrage, p. 238.
- ¹¹²Dexter, p. 19.
- ¹¹³W. J. McGlothlin, Baptist Confessions of Faith (Philadelphia, 1911), p. 52.
- ¹¹⁴Vedder, p. 204.
- ¹¹⁵J. H. Shakespeare, Baptists and Congregational Pioneers (London, 1906), p. 125.
- ¹¹⁶Armitage, p. 454.
- ¹¹⁷Burrage, p. 236.
- ¹¹⁸Burgess, p. 167.
- ¹¹⁹McGlothlin, p. 84.
- ¹²⁰Edward B. Underhill, Confessions of Faith and Other Public Documents (London, 1854), pp. VI-VII.
- ¹²¹McGlothlin, p. 87.
- ¹²²J. M. Cramp, Baptist History: from the Foundation of the Christian Church to the Present Time (Philadelphia, 1875), p. 287.

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- 124 Ibid., p. 288.
- 125 Ibid.
- 126 Armitage, p. 454.
- 127 Torbet, p. 66.
- 128 Ibid.
- 129 Burgess, p. 183.
- 130 Torbet, p. 66.
- 131 Shakespeare, p. 144.
- 132 McGlothlin, p. 54.
- 133 Shakespeare, p. 144.
- 134 McGlothlin, pp. 53-54.
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- 138 Burrage, p. 252.
- 139 Evans, p. 224.
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- 142 "Smyth, John," p. 477.
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- 144 Shakespeare, p. 145.
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- 147 Burgess, p. 12.
- 148 Dexter, p. 3.
- 149 Ibid.
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151 W. T. Whitley, A History of British Baptists (London, 1923), p. 27.

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153 Cramp, p. 289.

154 William Stokes, History of Baptists and their Principles (London, 1866), p. 143.

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162 Jordan, II, p. 264-265.

163 Helwys, p. III.

164 Ibid.

165 Ibid.

166 Ibid., pp. XI-XII.

167 Ibid.

168 Ibid., p. 69.

169 Ibid., p. XIV.

170 Ibid., p. VI.

171 Jordan, II, p. 265.

172 Ibid.

173 Helwys, p. X.

174 Orchard, p. 251.

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176 Edward B. Underhill, Tracts on Liberty of Conscience and Persecution (1614-1661) (London, 1846), p. 95.

- 177 Ibid., p. 101.
- 178 Cramp, p. 294.
- 179 Underhill, Tracts, p. 105.
- 180 Ibid., p. 113.
- 181 Cramp, p. 294.
- 182 Jordan, II, pp. 260-261.
- 183 Louise Fargo Brown, The Political Activities of the Baptists and Fifth Monarchy Men in England During the Inter-regnum (London, 1912), p. 2.
- 184 Cook, p. 85.
- 185 Jordan, II, p. 259.
- 186 Taylor, p. 89.
- 187 Jordan, II, p. 262.
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Helwys, Thomas. The Mistery of Iniquity. London: Kingsgate Press, 1935.

The printing of this work by Thomas Helwys was such that I was unable to read but a short portion. I did, however, receive information from the introduction by Dr. H. Wheeler Robinson.

McGlothlin, W. J. Baptist Confessions of Faith. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911.

This book contained important documents written by the first groups of Baptist. McGlothlin gives some valuable information preceding the confessions that was helpful in my paper.

Underhill, Edward B. Confessions of Faith and Other Public Documents. London: Haddon and Company, 1854.

This work contained much the same material as did McGlothlin's, and I relied more on McGlothlin than on Underhill.

Underhill, Edward B. Tracts on Liberty of Conscience and Persecution. London: Haddon and Company, 1846.

Underhill gave in this work John Murton's Dialogue against persecution which was interesting to read and was useful in my thesis.

Secondary Sources

Armitage, T. A History of the Baptists: Traced by their Vital Principles and Practices, from the time of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to the Year 1889. New York: Bryan, Taylor, and Company, 1886.

Armitage has written a very lengthy volume of material on the Baptists. His information concerning John Smyth's early life I found to be not very reliable as compared with other accounts.

Benedict, David. A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World. New York: Lewis Colby and Company, 1848.

I did not find this book very useful at all. It was difficult to understand in the way the material was presented.

Brown, Louise Fargo. The Political Activities of the Baptist and Fifth Monarchy Men in England during the Interregnum. London: Oxford University Press, 1912.

I read very little of this book since it dealt essentially with a later period, but the material which I did read was helpful and ^{was} presented in a very readable manner.

Burgess, W. H. John Smyth, the Se-Baptist, Thomas Helwys and the First Baptist Church in England with Fresh Light Upon the Pilgrim's Father's Church. London: 1911

I relied quite heavily on Burgess because his work was interesting and easy to read as well as being reliable. He is the only writer who wrote a complete book on the material which I covered in my paper.

Burrage, C. Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research. 2 Volumes. Cambridge: University Press, 1912. Burrage's work on the Baptists was informative, and I found it to be quite a valuable source.

"Clifton, Richard," Dictionary of National Biography, 1917, IV, 543-544. The D.N.B. served as an invaluable source for verification of data.

Cook, Richard, B. The Story of the Baptists in All Ages and Countries. Baltimore: Published by the Reverend H. M. Wharton, 1884. I was able to get some information about my topic from Cook, but I would not count this book as one of the most informative or reliable.

Cramp, J. M. Baptist History: from the Foundation of the Christian Church to the Present Time. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1875. This was a very long work though there was not a great amount of material that pertained to my paper.

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Goadby, J. J. Bye-paths in Baptist History: A Collection of

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New York: Bible and Publication Society, 1871.

This work is much as the title suggests. It was quite interesting to read, and the material is organized under topics rather than chronology.

"Johnson, Francis," Dictionary of National Biography, 1917, X, 897.

Jordan, W. K. The Development of Religious Toleration. 2 Volumes. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932-1936. Jordan was an excellent source not only for content, but also because the work is so well documented, I was able to obtain titles of other sources from the footnotes.

Orchard, G. H. A History of the Baptists in England. Nashville: Southwestern Publishing House, 1860. I got but little information from this book.

"Robinson, John," Dictionary of National Biography, 1917, XVII, 18-22.

Shakespeare, J. H. Baptists and Congregational Pioneers. London: The Kingsgate Press, 1906. Shakespeare concentrated more on the Congregational leaders than on the Baptists. However, I did receive some material from this work and found it to be accurate.

"Smyth, John," Dictionary of National Biography, 1917, XVIII, 898.

Stokes, William. History of Baptists and their Principles. London: Elliot Stock, 62, Paternoster Row, 1866. This was a short history of the Baptists from "Century One" to "Century Eighteen" offering but little information.

Taylor, Adam. The History of English General Baptists. 2 Parts. London: Printed for the author by R. Bore, Raven Row, Mile-End Turnpike, 1818. Taylor presented some useful information about John Smyth that I found helpful in writing my paper.

Torbet, Robert G. A History of the Baptists. Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1950. Torbet was a valuable source, and he provided much material for my paper. His dates concerning Smyth's education were not substantiated by the D.N.B., but other than that I found him to be completely reliable.

Underwood, A. C. A History of the English Baptists. London: Kingsgate Press, 1947. Underwood provided accurate material for my paper; I discovered him to be very helpful.

Vedder, Henry C. A Short History of the Baptists. Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1907.

I gained much information from Vedder that was useful in compiling my material.

Whitley, W. T. A History of British Baptists. London: Charles Griffin and Company Limited, 1923.

This was an excellent source and quite readable.