

## **John Smyth: The First Baptist** **April 2009**

(Third in a series on Baptist history commemorating the 400 year anniversary of Baptists)

John Smyth was a remarkable man who lived only 42 years (1570-1612). A capable theologian and writer, Smyth's main claim to fame is that he founded the first identifiable Baptist church of modern times, in Holland, about 1609. He entered Christ's College, Cambridge University, in 1586 to prepare for ministry. After graduation he was asked to remain there as fellow and teacher. He was ordained an Anglican priest in 1594 by the Bishop of London. He was an outspoken man, whose sharp words led him to trouble. The records show he was in the "clink" (jail) not long after his ordination for his refusal to conform to the teachings and practices of the Church of England.

Smyth would never have lasted long in many modern Baptist churches. He was known to call out sinners by name from the pulpit. He equated infant baptism with "spiritual adultery." Smyth never escaped the charges of being "changeable." He progressed through the stages of being an Anglican, Puritan, Separatist, Baptist, and eventually joined the Mennonites. Before his death he developed a distinctly ecumenical outlook. After his death most of his followers merged into the Mennonite church.

In 1606 Smyth met a group of Separatists in Gainsborough, England which included John Robinson, William Brewster, and William Bradford, some of whom later came to America on the Mayflower. Persecution was a constant threat to the Separatists for King James I (yes, the King James of the King James Version of the Bible!) threatened to "harrie them out of the land" unless they conformed to the state church.

Smyth and a layman named Thomas Helwys migrated to Holland as religious refugees. They adopted believer's baptism and founded the first Baptist on the basis of a covenant written by Smyth. It read (with original English spellings):

"They shooke of this yoake of antichristian bondage, and as ye Lords free people, joined them selves (by a covenant with the Lord) into a church estate, in ye fellowship of ye gospel, to walke in all his ways."

Having come to believe that the New Testament taught baptism only for those who professed faith in Christ, Smyth baptized himself, then Helwys and 40 others in the congregation. Affusion, or pouring, was the mode of baptism. It would be another generation before the Baptists determined they should be immersed in their baptism.

Smyth eventually regretted his self-baptism as disorderly and came to view the Mennonites as the church most in keeping with the teachings of the New Testament. Evidently the Mennonites did not think as favorably of Smyth. They rejected his request for church membership. After a time of severe illness from "consumption," Smyth died on August 20, 1612.

It was Thomas Helwys and the other Baptists who carried on this fledgling movement of Christians who believed the church should be comprised only of those who consciously and freely profess their faith in Jesus Christ.