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How drastically did John Smyth's Theology Change over Time?
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If the question in view is to be answered with any degree of precision, criteria must first be established that will determine in what sense the term “drastic” will be employed to refer to the changes in John Smyth’s theology. Two levels of analyses will be used to evaluate how drastically the theology of John Smith changed over time. First, the developing differences in the *content* of his theological belief will be assessed. Secondly, the *time frame* in which the changes in theological content took place will be noted. Additionally, two degrees of scope will be considered: (1) the narrow scope of John Smith’s theology reflecting change from one major theological position to another and (2) the broad scope of overall change from beginning to end. This distinction is important because a change that seems drastic *prima face* in the broad scope may, in fact, be a subtle change throughout each successive theological position, resulting in a major shift in thought overall. In this way, the danger of classifying Smyth’s theological development too narrowly or too broadly can be avoided. To be clear, this paper does not argue that John Smyth’s theology changed; the question itself assumes that it did. This fact is, as far as I know, universally accepted and is thoroughly evident in his own writings. Actually, it would be difficult to find any major figure whose thought did not change over time in one way or another. Rather, this paper is concerned with the *extent* to which John Smyth’s theology changed over time, utilizing the aforementioned criteria as a guide.

John Smyth came under the heavy influence of Puritan beliefs when, in the Easter term of 1586, he entered Christ’s College, Cambridge to prepare for the Anglican clergy. Christ’s College hosted many who held Puritan Reformed beliefs during the time Smyth studied there. At the same time, the College was not void of beliefs that challenged the classic Calvinist position; Arminianism adherents could also be found among the College in those days. Separatists also

had influence at Christ's College during Smyth's tenure there. Smyth even explicitly states that he received part of his education at Cambridge from Separatists.¹ Although Smyth came to hold basically Puritan beliefs during his time at Cambridge, the Separatist influence would eventually manifest itself in his theology. In any case, John Smyth's theology was influenced by Puritan beliefs above any others during his Cambridge days, even though he was exposed to opposing viewpoints.

From the time of his entrance into Christ's College in 1586 to 1605, Smyth published two books, *The Bright Morning Starre* (1603), a series of sermon expositions of Psalm 22 he preached while city lecturer at Lincoln, and *A Paterne of True Prayer* (1605), which was an exposition of the Lord's prayer, written primarily to clear up accusations against his theology of prayer. From these works we find clear evidence that Smyth was a Puritan with orthodox Protestant beliefs. For instance, Smyth demonstrates belief in "originall sinne,"² the divinity of Jesus Christ,³ the authority of Scripture as "the rule of faith and manners,"⁴ total depravity,⁵ "the Lords predestination,"⁶ the perseverance of the saints,⁷ the satisfaction theory of the atonement,⁸ and "iustification by faith onely."⁹ He denounced Separatism¹⁰ and Anabaptism,¹¹ encouraged the Magistrates to actively support the religious endeavors of the Church,¹² and held to Calvin's

¹ John Smyth, *The Works of John Smyth: Fellow of Christ's College, 1594-8*, ed. W.T. Whitley (1915; reprint, Paris, AK: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 2009), I:71. "...although from some of them [Separatists], I received part of my education in Cambridge..."

² Ibid., I:181.

³ Ibid., I:211. "...Christ Iesus God-man, in whose name wee are to pray, and through whose satisfaction and obedience we obtaine forgiuenes..."

⁴ Ibid., I:105.

⁵ Ibid., I:62, 108.

⁶ Ibid., I:134. "...the Lord...predestinateth the means whereby this end [the glorification of God by man] must be atchieued..."

⁷ Ibid., I:220. "...perseuerance followeth grace, and is a necessarie consequent thereof..."

⁸ Ibid., I:207. "Christ...satisfied the debt for us..."

⁹ Ibid., I:66.

¹⁰ Ibid., I:71. "...I am far from the opinion of them which separate from our Church..."

¹¹ Ibid., I:165. "...hee [the devil] hath inspired that deuellish doctrine into the conused heads of the Anabaptists..."

¹² Ibid., I:166. "...the Magistrates should cause all men to worship the true God..."

five-fold offices of the church: bishop, teacher, ruling elder, deacon, and widow.¹³ It is evident from the content of his first two published works that John Smyth was a Puritan in terms of his theology and practice, for he generally adhered to classic Puritan beliefs and remained loyal to the Church of England during this time.

It would not be long, however, until Smyth, like others before him, would wander beyond the Puritan orthodoxy to a more radical theological position. Some have argued that Smyth's move toward Separatist convictions was influenced by the consistent criticism he received from Anglican authorities about his public preaching following his removal from the city lectureship at Lincoln in 1602.¹⁴ This criticism ultimately resulted in Smyth being reprimanded for accepting an offer to fill an often absent minister's (Jerome Phillips) pulpit at the parish in Gainsborough in 1603. This probably led Smyth to meet with other Puritans interested in reform who were also in trouble for advancing Puritanism among the Anglicans in Gainsborough. These relationships led to a later meeting in the home of Sir William Bowes, where a discussion of the arguments for Separatism was held and where, after nine months, a consensus to form a Separatist congregation was established in 1606.¹⁵

The writings of John Smyth during his Separatist stage reflect theological shifts, but not as clearly as one would hope.¹⁶ Two main writings that were published between 1606 and 1609 provide evidence for these shifts: *Principles and Inferences Concerning the Visible Church*

¹³ Ibid., I:158; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), book IV, ch. 3, paragraphs 4-9; cited in James R. Coggins, "The Theological Positions of John Smith," *Baptist Quarterly* 30 (April 1984): 247.

¹⁴ William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1996), 287; B.R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 120-121; cited in Jason K. Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth: Puritan, Separatist, Baptist, Mennonite* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 46.

¹⁵ Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth*, 46.

¹⁶ Coggins suggests this is because these writings are not primarily concerned with theology in general, but rather ecclesiology in particular; Smyth became consumed with the doctrine of the Church during this period. Coggins, "The Theological Positions of John Smyth," 248.

(1607) and *Parralleles, Censures, Observations* (1609). These books reveal that Smyth, in a sense, remained a Calvinist during this period. He still affirms his belief in the authority of Scripture,¹⁷ the glory of God,¹⁸ faith,¹⁹ predestination,²⁰ and arguably, total depravity.²¹ Calvin's offices of the church are supported,²² Anabaptism rejected,²³ and the support of Magistrates are still evident in his thought.²⁴ The fundamental difference, however, displayed in these writings compared to those from Smyth's Puritan stage are ecclesiological. What makes Smyth a Separatist and no longer a Puritan is not his rejection of Calvinist-Puritan principles *per se*, but his adoption of a new, more strict, understanding of the "true church." In Smyth's earlier thought, he found the sum of the gospel to be "faith and repentance."²⁵ Now he believed that "Jesus Christ...is the only King, Priest, & Prophet of his Church."²⁶ In John Smyth's mind, the only thing that distinguished the Puritans from the Separatists was the actual separation from the Church of England. In fact, like most Separatists, Smyth argued from Calvin's concept of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King (in relation to the Christian Church) to separation from the Church of England.²⁷ The argument centers around the three corresponding signs of the true church that follow necessarily from the three roles of Christ aforementioned: the word, the sacraments, and discipline. Smyth depends heavily on Calvin's definition of the church in these terms to support his move to a Separatist position.²⁸ He argues that the Church of England is void of the

¹⁷ Smyth, *Works*, I:252. "Gods word doth absolutely describe vnto vs the only true shape of a true visible church..."

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., I:255; II:522. "Fayth is the knowdged of the doctrine of salvation by Christ..."; "The way of receaving members is fayth testified by obedience..."; "...whatsoever is not Fayth is sinne..."

²⁰ Ibid., II:350

²¹ Ibid., II:464, 499.

²² Ibid., I:267; II:394; 507.

²³ Ibid., II:349-50, 385.

²⁴ Ibid., II:519.

²⁵ Ibid., I:157.

²⁶ Ibid., II:525.

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, II, xv; Coggins, "Theological Positions", 248.

²⁸ Smyth, *Works*, II:460, 473-7, 510, 550.

discipline corresponding to Christ's Kingship of the church (that is, they do not properly exercise discipline, especially in regard to protecting the sacraments from illegitimate sinners), and thereon bases his separation. Though this argument provided the basis for which Separatists such as John Smyth criticized and separated from the Church of England, it did not serve as the theoretical foundation in the establishment of their covenanted churches. The covenant definition established by the Separatists was demonstrably different than the Calvinistic model utilized in their argument against the Church of England. It does not mention the Old Testament or consequently, the concept of the three roles of Christ and the corresponding marks of a true church; unlike Puritan theology, it was not based on the Pauline epistles; and Smyth's covenant ecclesiology, where the covenant is between individual men and women and God, is not directly related to Calvin's covenant theology, where the covenant is with the corporate elect.²⁹ Although Calvinist theology is clearly present at this time in Smyth's thought, it does not serve as the ultimate grounds for the establishment of his Separatist church.

The discrepancies between Smyth's basis for separating from the Church of England on the one hand, and establishing a new church on the other, make it difficult to provide a straightforward assessment of how drastic his move from Puritanism to Separatism was. He evidently maintained his Calvinist theology in principle but seemed to steer away from it a bit in practice. His writings reveal a general uniformity regarding the fundamentals of Calvinism but only insofar as they provided him with the ingredients to develop a case against the Church of England. When it came time to establish the Separatist church in Gainsborough, Smyth, probably under the influence of Francis Johnson, covenanted under principles not in accordance

²⁹ Coggins, "Theological Positions," 249.

with the some of the elements of Calvinism evident in his work during this period. Although attempting to be systematic, Smyth's theology here lacked the consistency necessary to develop a comprehensive theological system. Because he was preoccupied with ecclesiology and with the establishment of a Separatist church, not to mention defending his brand of Separatism against others,³⁰ Smyth probably overlooked these inconsistencies or at least did not yet consider them important enough to decipher. It is as if he came to his understanding of the true church through the Calvinist system and then retro-modified some aspects of his theology in light of his developing ecclesiology. Smyth's move from Puritanism to Separatism, therefore, is relatively drastic considering the major and divisive shift occurring in his understanding of the church and the short period of time between the publication of *A Paterne of True Prayer* (1605), which propounds a general Puritan theology, and the establishment of the Separatist church in Gainsborough (c.1606) along with the subsequent migration to the Netherlands (late 1607 or early 1608).

Smyth's next major theological shift displays more clearly and decisively a move away from traditional Puritan-Separatist ideology into new theological territory. In fact, the founding of an entirely new movement of the radical reformation is borne out of Smyth's progressive theological tenacity and his boldness to take the principles of his convictions to their logical conclusions. The one work that reflects this further move is his *The Character of the Beast or The False Constitution of the Church* (1609). In it is found the first record of John Smyth's defense of believers baptism over against the pedo-baptism of his theological heritage. The logical progression in Smyth's thought on this point is clear. As a Separatist, Smyth rejected the

³⁰ John Smyth, "The Differences of the Churches of Separation," *The Works of John Smith: Fellow of Christ's College, 1594-8*, ed. W.T. Whitley (1915; reprint, Paris, AK: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 2009), I:269-320.

Church of England, especially its lack of discipline, but also its preaching, communion, and its baptism.³¹ Separatists believed that true church membership could only be granted to those who had covenanted with God. Since children cannot make covenants, then they could not receive the benefits of church membership. On this point, according to Smyth, Separatists had to either accept the Church of England and its baptism and realign with it or the Catholic Church, or they had to accept believer's baptism as a sign of salvation and therefore as a requirement for membership in the true church.³² Not only did Smyth and his followers accept believer's baptism, but they went as far as baptizing themselves, with Smyth leading the way.³³ The Anabaptists were detested for their believer's baptism; that Smyth presumed to baptize himself and his followers was even worse from the perspective of his critics. This act alone provides good grounds to support a major shift in Smyth's theology that brings him to an explicitly Baptist position.

Although there is still evidence of orthodox Calvinism present in *The Character of the Beast or The False Constitution of the Church*,³⁴ there is also good evidence to show that Smyth was steadily drifting away from this position even further than before. For instance, he unequivocally rejected the covenant theology of Calvinism in his argument against Richard Clifton.³⁵ Calvin linked the sacraments with the seal of the New Testament covenant, whereas Smyth said that the Holy Spirit was the seal; Calvin linked Old Testament circumcision with New Testament baptism, whereas Smyth focused on the spiritual circumcision of the heart.³⁶

³¹ Smyth, *Works*, II:495.

³² Smyth, "The Character of the Beast," *Works*, II:563-680; Coggins, "Theological Positions," 252.

³³ Smyth, *Works*, II:757.

³⁴ Smyth accepted (at least in writing) the divinity of Christ, a Puritan understanding of scriptural authority, justification by faith, original sin, and predestination; Smyth, *Works*, II:572, 624, 599, 638, 677, respectively; Coggins, "Theological Positions," 253.

³⁵ Smyth, "The Character of the Beast," *Works*, II:563-680.

³⁶ Coggins, "Theological Positions," 253.

Also, he employed a quote from Tertullian that possibly denied original sin.³⁷ These developments demonstrate a definite move further away from his Puritan-Separatist background.

As it has already been noted, Smyth's adoption of Baptist views is a tracing out of his previous theological beliefs to their logical conclusions. But regardless of this, the change that took place in his theology over the span of about one or two years (1608-1610) proves somewhat drastic. Just because his Baptist conclusions were logical extensions of previous principles does not limit the degree of difference between his Separatism and newfound Baptist convictions; the effect is still the same. It seems as though Smyth, himself, did not regard his se-baptism as a long theological leap away from Separatism. Rather, for Smyth, to be a Separatist was to be a Baptist, if the logic he applied is sound. Nevertheless, Smyth's once mild Separatism evolved into relatively extreme views on theology (believer's baptism) and its practical outworking (se-baptism). This change was the one that his contemporaries found most outrageous, and for good reason: Smyth was the first to take this next bold step of reformation among the English Separatists.

But for John Smyth, the theological journey was not over. In February 1610, only about a year after baptizing himself, Smyth, along with many others who were his followers, applied to join the Waterlander Mennonite Church.³⁸ There has been endless debate about the relationship between the Anabaptists and the Baptists and particularly the extent to which the Mennonites in the Netherlands had an influence on John Smyth's theology. These questions, although interesting and helpful, go beyond the scope of this paper. What is important here is the change in Smyth's theology that allowed him to make this next move towards the Mennonite tradition.

³⁷ Smyth, *Works*, II:568-9; Coggins, "Theological Positions," 253. Coggins cites II:569 as the source of the quote, but it is actually found on II:568 with Smyth's commentary continuing onto II:569.

³⁸ Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth*, 87; Coggins, "Theological Positions," 253.

Smyth produced five written works during this time of transition, but only two of them were written in English: *Propositions and Conclusions, concerning true Christian religion, conteyning a confession of faith of certaine English people, liuinge at Amsterdam* and *The Last Booke of Iohn Smith Called the Retractation of His Errours, and the Confirmation of the Truth*.³⁹ In his earlier work, *The Character of the Beast*, Smyth dealt heavily with the problem of original sin; it is on this point that he began to diverge with classic Calvinist thought. One question arising from his work on original sin was the obvious problem of the damnation of unbaptized children. In his argument with Clifton he suggested that many, and perhaps all, children would be saved through the invisible will of God's predestination.⁴⁰ It has been suggested that Smyth became a theological Anabaptist at this point to avoid having to admit that unbaptized children would be damned.⁴¹ In any case, Smyth ultimately came to believe that all children would be saved on the grounds that original sin does not exist.⁴² By extension, then, the denial of original sin meant that human beings were not deprived of free will in the Fall, which leads necessarily to a denial of predestination. Smyth also denied some other dominant elements of Protestantism that he once held, including but not limited to the satisfaction theory of atonement.⁴³ It is clear that before his final move to a Mennonite position, the theological stage was set to play out this transition.

There are two pivotal shifts that took place in Smyth's theology that accompanied his desire to join the Mennonite church. One major area of development in Smyth's theology at this time was his Christology. Using current medical theory, Smyth toyed with the Anabaptist

³⁹ The other three works were written in Latin and were obviously directed at the Dutch Mennonites; Coggins, "Theological Positions," cit. 87, p. 262.

⁴⁰ Smyth, *Works*, II:603, 634.

⁴¹ Coggins, "Theological Positions," 254.

⁴² Smyth, *Works*, II:682.

⁴³ Coggins, "Theological Positions," 254.

Melchiorite Christology, which stated that Christ received only his second flesh from Mary, not his first.⁴⁴ This view naturally leads to a spiritualized understanding of the incarnation that was characteristic of this Anabaptist doctrine. Secondly, he adopted Anabaptist views about the relationship between church and state. Where he once thought the magistracy was responsible for aiding the church in its mission, he now rejected their involvement with religious affairs; they are not to “meddle with religion.”⁴⁵ This entails the belief that Christians should not be magistrates, which Smyth came to believe.⁴⁶ Yet, Smyth did not agree on every point with the Mennonites. There were elements of Calvinism in his thought even still. For example, he continued to hold to the Calvinist principle that whatever is not specifically prescribed in Scripture is not allowed in the Church.⁴⁷ Additionally, Smyth maintained his aforementioned belief in the threefold office of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King, and in the corollary giving of the Word, sacraments, and discipline to the Church.⁴⁸ Be that as it may, the most striking similarity in Smyth’s mature thought with regard to Anabaptist theology is his emphasis on the Holy Spirit. It must not be forgotten, though, that the Holy Spirit played a dominant role in each successive theological modification of Smyth, but it found its place most comfortably in this final position. It is certain from the evidence of Smyth’s acceptance of some major points of Anabaptist theology and the division that ensued between him and Thomas Helwys, who refused to follow Smyth in joining the Mennonite church, that Smyth did in reality become an authentic Anabaptist.

⁴⁴ Smyth, *Works*, II:758-9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, II:748-9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, II:729; Coggins, “Theological Positions,” 255.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, II:733; Coggins, “Theological Positions,” 255.

This final change in Smyth's theology occurred over the span of only a year's time, the shortest time in which he moved from one major position to the next. His anthropology, ecclesiology, and theology took on some brand new characteristics that had not been evident in his thought before, notwithstanding that he did retain some previously held beliefs that had been evident throughout his theological pilgrimage. Taking into consideration this very brief span of time and the extent to which his thought differed, it must be concluded that this final shift was the most drastic of Smyth's life, however logical his doctrinal changes might have been.

An inspection of the whole of John Smyth's changing theology reveals a complex and bold character with a passion to pursue his convictions to their logical conclusions at any cost. To answer the deceptively multifaceted question "How drastically did John Smyth's theology change over time?" requires an assessment based on the criteria established at the beginning: a look at the change of Smyth's theological content and the time frame in which it occurred in both a narrow and broad contextual scope. In doing so, it has been demonstrated that Smyth's theology went through some drastic changes between one major theological position to another. Seeing the changes that took place from beginning to end reveals an even clearer picture of the drastic nature of the changes in John Smyth's theology over time: beginning as a Puritan, loyal to the Church of England and ending as an Anabaptist, a different brand of Christian tradition altogether, largely different from the one in which he began. Paradoxically, there does exist a thread of logic that connects one end to the other within Smyth's theological spectrum. Therefore, in response to the question at hand, John Smyth's theology changed quite drastically over time insofar as conflicting theological beliefs were held and ecclesiological practices were performed in specific contexts. However, it must be recognized that in another sense, Smyth's

life of theological variety is a tightly linked argument that merely worked itself out through the different stages of his theological belief over the course of the life he lived during a religiously tumultuous time in late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth century Europe.

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