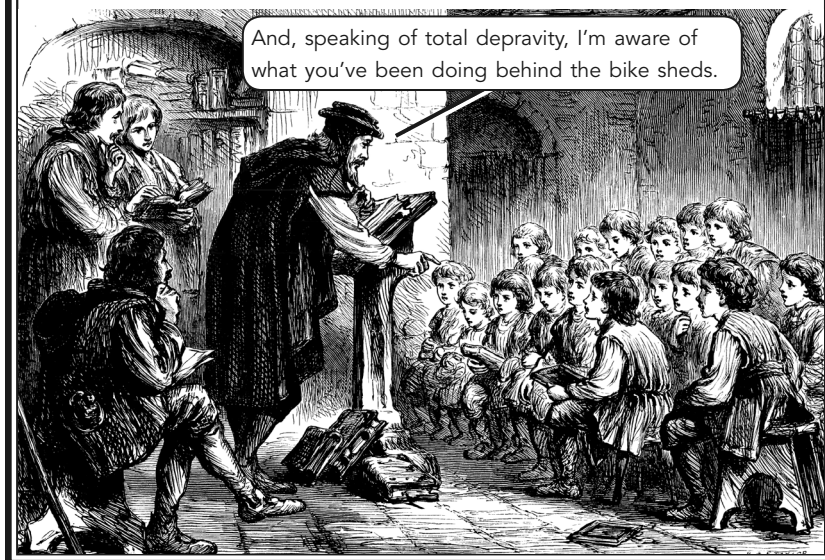


Great Moments in Reformation History

NUMBER 27: Beza teaches his 'Introduction to Calvinism' class.



John the Baptist

From Tyndale's time onwards, the Low Countries had offered a place of relative safety for evangelicals of all types and, under Elizabeth and James, many Separatists followed their earlier brethren to Amsterdam.

One of the most radical of the radical Separatists was John Smith, which, given it was his real name, must have made choosing an alias difficult. He was more of a kind of man-sized cell: he simply could not stop separating.

Smith is a pivotal figure in church history. He had studied for the Anglican priesthood at Christ's College, Cambridge, where, like so many, he was radicalised by the Puritans. He took a job as a private chaplain, but was sacked for his radical preaching. So, supporting himself as a physician (he had studied biology at

Cambridge) he formed his own church, gathering around him a ‘congregation’ of like-minded followers. Of course, worshipping together in such a way was illegal, so they had to meet in secret locations in rural Lincolnshire. Even so, their numbers grew such that they had to meet in two groups. Smith led one group in Gainsborough, while a man called John Robinson (who, like Smith, had studied and been radicalised at Cambridge) led its sister group in the excellently named Scrooby. Then the authorities discovered Robinson’s group, so in 1607 they left England for the Low Countries, in a move which surely has been immortalised as the Scrooby Do.*

Smith’s group joined them a little later, their exodus financed by one of their members, Thomas Helwys, a prominent lawyer. In Holland they were offered a place to meet in a bakehouse owned by a Mennonite, Jan Munter. Although grateful for the accommodation, they were wary: the Mennonites were, of course, Anabaptists, and they had a reputation as heretics, revolutionaries and generally bad eggs.

But in Amsterdam, Smith started developing radical ideas of his own. First, he insisted that the Bible should only be read in Greek and Hebrew in church. Then, he declared the entire Anglican church to be false. In a book he wrote in 1608, *The Character of the Beast*, he argued that since the Anglican church was a false church, then all baptisms it carried out were false. ‘Baptism is not washing with water,’ he wrote, ‘but it is the baptism of the Spirit, the confession of the mouth, and the washing with water: how then can any man without great folly wash with water which is the least and last of baptism?’ As he continued to think about baptism, he decided that the Anabaptists were right – only believers should be baptised. Baptism was a matter of choice and commitment: it was adult, believer’s baptism

*It took them a lot of effort to get there. Their first attempt was thwarted when they were betrayed to the authorities by the sea captain who had promised them transport. They were searched, and all their money and possessions confiscated.

which signified that you were a true believer and which allowed you to become a member of the Church.* So he decided to get baptised, and, since he could think of no one more qualified, he baptised himself. This act scandalised many of the other Separatists in the city. Richard Bernard nicknamed him a ‘Se-Baptist’ (self-baptiser). This derogatory term stuck, although gradually people stopped using the ‘se-’ bit.

And, so, John Smith invented the Baptists.

Smith was a man prone to second thoughts. Not to mention third ideas, fourth notions and fifth delusions. And eventually all the ‘self-baptising’ mockery got to him and he came to believe that maybe he’d been a bit presumptuous, so he had the Mennonites baptise him again. This was, technically, his third go at baptism, since he had already been baptised as an infant, and it really infuriated his fellow leader Thomas Helwys, who disagreed with the Mennonites on matters of Christology, on their rejection of oaths and on their pacifism. Helwys retaliated in the only way he knew how: he separated from Smith. So it was that the Baptists – who at this point had only been going for a year – split up. Smith was excommunicated, thus establishing another key practice of Baptist congregations: sacking the minister.

Smith ended up joining the Mennonite Church. Helwys decided that he would return to England, on the grounds that it was wrong to stay safe in exile when others were living in ignorance back home. So along with ten other fellow believers, he returned to London, and founded the first Baptist congregation on British soil in Spitalfields, which at that time was just outside the city. He died in prison in about 1615.

* This emphasis on a personal choice and commitment also led Smith to reject predestination. Later on, different Baptist groups appeared who, unlike him, adopted Calvinism. These became known as the Particular Baptists, to differentiate them from those vague, not-very-particular wishy-washy General, or non-Calvinist Baptists.

TOP REFORMERS



John Smith

Born: Nottinghamshire, England, c.1554

Died: Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1612

AKA: John Smyth

A Puritan preacher, he left the Church to found his own Separatist congregation. They fled to Holland in 1609 where he founded the first modern Baptist church. Later he became a Mennonite.

Fun Fact: His church in Holland was called 'The Brethren of the Separation of the Second English Church at Amsterdam'.

INFLUENCE 35

THEOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE 20

FACIAL HAIR 40

GENERAL GLOOMINESS 10

ABUSIVENESS 0

HAT QUALITY 0

PROPENSITY TO VIOLENCE 5