

A Visit from John Smyth
Monologue of John Smyth: The Father of the Baptist Movement

Matthew 3:13-17
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“Good morrow. How do you fare today?” as we used to say back in the 1600’s. Smyth is the name. John Smyth. We spell it the correct way, S-M-Y-T-H.

I understand you spell it with an “I,” but that’s the problem with America, isn’t it? “I” seems to be in the middle of a lot of what you do these days.

I shouldn’t be casting stones. Even in the 1600’s, we seemed to do well in looking out for ourselves. That seems to always be magnified when people get into positions of power.

In my day, the one with the power was the King.

Come to think of it, “King” is also spelled with an “I.” With every decision, a king will ask, “How will I benefit from this?”

I was born in England in the days that were ruled by kings. I know you are very aware of the disadvantages of this system because we used to be a part of the same family before that nasty divorce we had around 1776.

I cannot say that I blame your ancestors for rebelling against the monarchy. They wanted to be free from England’s taxes, free to make their own laws, free to speak their mind, free to assemble, free to bear arms, and free to worship as they pleased.

But let me humbly remind you that the faith you now hold so dear and the freedoms which you now espouse have roots that reach back to people like my friends Thomas Helwys, John Robinson and myself.

You see, before your ancestors rebelled against the monarchy we rebelled against it, too. It’s helpful to know your roots, so you never forget who you are, and where you need to go.

Haven’t your parents ever said to you, “Don’t ever forget who you are!”

I understand that you can take a piece of cotton on the end of a stick and rub it on your gums and put it in a box beside the road and the mail carrier will pick it up. In a week or two the mail carrier will bring a letter back to you and it will tell you who you are related to. Have any of you ever done that? If you have, you may have discovered that we are blood kin. Cousins we are. Some of you likely came from places like Southampton, Reading, Bristol, or York.

Of course, many of you would discover that you came from other parts of the world. But whether your skin is red, yellow, black, or white, if you believe in the freedom to choose a

religion without the interference of the government, or even in the freedom to choose no religion at all, then we are still related.

You can trace part of your spiritual roots back to people like me and those who first stood for religious freedom. Many people have a little Baptist in them and they don't even know it.

Now I wasn't the first one to feel compelled to follow my conscience and oppose those in authority because I believed in Bible Freedom and Soul Freedom. Perhaps you have heard that Martin Luther was a real troublemaker for the Catholic Church. As Luther read and studied the Bible in its original languages, he became convinced that several key practices of the Catholic Church were not biblical. When he posted 95 of his grievances against the Catholic Church and the Pope on the door of Christ Church in Wittenberg, Germany, it began the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago. Great changes followed.

But it is human nature for people to reach for power. Even though the Church of England broke ties with Rome, it was still very Catholic and very controlling. Its theology was still unbiblical in many places. Instead of the Pope controlling the church, it was the kings and queens that had the power. It took me a while to understand this.

As a very young man I was a part of this state-run church. I was ordained as an Anglican priest at Christ's College in Cambridge.

I loved God and I took my calling seriously. But the longer I remained a priest, the more I struggled to uphold the teachings and carry out my duties with integrity. (Ibid)

Six years after my ordination, I renounced my priesthood and my association with the Anglican Church.

(<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/denominationalfounders/john-smyth.html>)

During these years, I was influenced by a group of people who took the Bible seriously. Instead of following the traditions of the state church, these people wanted to follow the teachings of the Bible as closely as possible. (Ibid)

That should be the goal of every Christian, but that's not always an easy task because the Bible is often misquoted, misinterpreted, and misapplied. We don't have a Pope or one person telling us what's right or wrong, which is good, because no one person or even a group of people are infallible. However, that means we are not always going to agree about what the Bible says or how it applies to our lives.

But we cherish the freedom to read it for ourselves and not be forced or coerced to follow certain rules that others tell us we must follow.

There was a time when people had no choice. Everyone had to follow the same rules and interpret the Bible the same way. In England, when I was born, the Church and the State were one and the same. If you are hoping that happens again in America, be careful what you hope for.

The Puritans were a group who believed that a lot of what was being said about the Bible was not true. They were called “Puritans” because they wanted to purify the Church.
(<https://levellers.wordpress.com/2007/08/28/john-smyth-1570-1612-puritan-separatist-baptist-mennonite/28/>)

Some of the Puritans believed there was hope for the Church of England so they tried to reform the church from within. (Ibid)

I didn't see any hope in trying to turn that old archaic ship around. Kings and those around kings only want power and they do not care about spiritual matters.

I concluded that the Church of England was a false church and the best thing to do was leave her behind, so I did, along with many others. (Ibid)

We separated from the church of England, so people called us Separatists, another very original term, wouldn't you say? (Ibid)

Now all of you are so used to free thinking and religious freedom that you do not understand that this took some bravery.

We put our lives on the line for what we believed.

I organized a congregation in London. We had to meet in secret because our gathering was illegal. (Ibid)

Our numbers got so large we had to split into two groups to keep from being noticed. (Ibid)

I led a group that met in Gainsborough. Another group that met in Scrooby was led by John Robinson. (Ibid)

May I ask you, is religious freedom important enough to you that you would move to a new city so you could worship as you please? Would you leave your home or your country or even your family behind to worship God with others?

That's what John Robinson did. His group fled to the Netherlands, which was the most religious tolerant nation in Western Europe. (Ibid)

From there, this congregation eventually sailed to New England as the Pilgrims of American Colonial history. Religious freedom grows deep into your American soil. (Ibid)

As for me and my congregation, we refused to live by the religion of the King of England.

Like Daniel of the Bible who continued to pray to God despite the edict of the king who said people could only pray to the him, we also chose to live by the word of God as we understood it.

To escape persecution, we also set sail for the Netherlands. A very generous lawyer, Thomas Helwys, financed our trip. (Ibid)

We were not the first people to leave England searching for religious freedom. A group called the Mennonites were already there. (Ibid)

We were suspicious of the Mennonites, and they of us at first. But the longer we stayed, the more we came to appreciate each other. (Ibid)

The Mennonites believed that infant baptism did nothing to secure one's soul unto God. Infants cannot believe. Scriptural baptism is for believers. (Ibid)

Because I found evidence of this in the Bible, I believed this was the way a church should be established --on believer's baptism. Because I didn't believe there was a true church that could baptize me, I poured water over my head; then I baptized 36 members of my congregation. Thomas Helwys was one of them. So we didn't practice immersion in the beginning.

The amount of water wasn't as important to us as who we were baptizing. In our church, we only baptized believers. (Ibid)

This was the beginning of the Baptist movement because historically, only confessing baptized believers make up a Baptist church.

While our Separatist friends continued to baptize infants, we did not. They also gave a superior role to the clergy over the laity.
(<http://www.baptisthistory.org/baptistorigins/turningpoints.html>)

We decided that every believer has an equal voice in the affairs of the church and that every believer is a minister. The work of Christ belongs to every Christian. Clergy has a respected place, but not a place of power over the members. (Ibid)

When I look back over my life, I notice it's been a journey of trying to figure God out. I've changed my mind a lot, but that's O.K., because life is a journey.

I started out Anglican. Then I found a home with the Puritans. Then I became a Separatist. Then I found a home with the Mennonites. Later, after baptizing myself, I questioned whether that was such a good idea. At the time, I thought it was the right thing to do. I mean, who was I going to get to baptize me? So, I decided to renounce my church membership and I petitioned the Mennonites to become a member of their group shortly before I died. (Ibid)

My friend Thomas Helwys could not take that journey and he bravely returned with many members of the church and went back to England just before my death. (Ibid)

It wasn't long before he joined me in heaven because of his brave stance and how he confronted the king.

Thomas wrote a short book that was the first plea for religious freedom in the English language. He signed a copy and sent it to the King. That took some guts. (Ibid)

In the book Thomas wrote that the king did not have any power over the conscience of the people. He said that the king has authority in earthly matters and in those matters people are subject to him, but the king did not have any say in the religion of the people. That was between people and their God. It would be God who would be their judge in these matters, and not the king. Helwys appealed to the scriptures for his authority in writing these words. (Ibid)

For his boldness in advocating religious freedom for the people, Thomas was arrested and placed in prison and that is where he died. (Ibid)

The Helwys group of Baptists became known as General Baptist.

They began to practice baptism by immersion because they believed the New Testament taught immersion as the true form of baptism. (Ibid)

This is the reason people began to call all of you "baptizers" or "Baptists." (Ibid)

From the beginning, people like Thomas and me were dissenters. We were rebels. We were in the minority and we had to stand up for what we believed.

We had to seek our own space to worship and we had to work out our faith.

Today, you must continue to work out your faith. It is tempting for you to try to squash the rights of minority groups seeking religious freedom because you are in the majority and you are afraid of losing your majority status. But remember, no one can be coerced to worship or believe a certain way, not even your way.

If you want a Christian nation, it cannot be by decree. It cannot be declared. Constantine tried that in the third century. It can only be because people observe you being Christian and you win them over by your love and witness.

Baptists stand for religious freedom for all people. Remember your roots. Remember my struggle. Be thankful you live in a country where your forefathers established the First Amendment to the Constitution that reads:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Thomas Helwys, who pastored the first Baptist Church in England, died to see that such a law could be established.

As Baptists, let's continue to protect it. It's part of our DNA. If you want a Christian nation, we must first be a church of Christians who live out our life as a witness where we live.

It must start with you, in your home, in your town, in your business, at your school, on the ball field, where you play, where you volunteer, with your neighbors and friends, among strangers.

You must take a stand, not in an obnoxious way, but in a way that draws people to Christ through your love, service, humility, caring, going the extra mile, loving your enemies, seeking justice, and speaking out for those that are mistreated and abused.

Win people to Christ by the way you live. Show them the way to be Christian and sometimes use words.

Let us pray that there will be another generation of Baptist to follow you who will faithfully serve the Lord.