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THE ENGLISH SEPARATISTS AND

JOHN SMYTH REVISITED*

Keith Clements was right to welcome, in his January editorial, the introduction to our journal of 'a slightly polemical note' and 'a measure of debate'. He was right even though he seemed to be treading with a wariness which would make the late Agag (I Samuel 15.32 AV) seem like Ian Botham going for the fastest century of the season.

That said, I must confess it took something of an effort to return yet again to the arguments and conclusions which I had published thirteen years ago and to an area which I have since retrodden with some extremely able research students, including Dr Stephen Brachlow. On the face of it, some of the continuing debates seem somewhat sterile. Among them is that about the debt of the English Separatists or the English Baptists to the Elizabethan Puritans and to the continental Anabaptists. Yet on this issue, in his article 'Puritan Theology and General Baptist Origins', Dr Brachlow does make some new points of real value. It seems very likely, as he suggests, that the Separatists may have drawn their 'mutualist' or 'conditional' covenant theology from their Puritan predecessors after all. Perhaps we may go further than he does since it was some thirty years ago that Leonard Trinterud suggested the idea that the whole concept was originally introduced to the English theological scene by William Tyndale.¹ Furthermore Dr Brachlow shows, very plausibly, that John Smyth's 'Arminianism' could also well have grown from Separatist and Puritan origins. This being so perhaps the matter cannot yet be left only to those dry souls who unwearyingly pursue their doctorates by collecting and charting the course of other people's theories!

On the other hand, I am even less convinced that there is much further profit in pursuing the question as to whether Baptists or Anabaptists are Protestants.² For I suppose that, in the end, it all depends on how you define Baptist, or Anabaptist, or Protestant! Nevertheless, I gladly confess how much I enjoyed Professor Coggins's lusty progress through the thickets of his subject,³ handing out slaps and (more occasionally) sweeties to his predecessors with the apparent omniscience of a children's nannie from the days before Vatican II when omniscience was more in fashion. My chief regret is that he apparently chose to reflect on my work through the blurred image provided by Professor Shantz's spectacles.⁴

Chronologically it seems sensible to consider Dr Shantz's

* A response to the articles by Douglas Shantz, James Coggins and Stephen Brachlow (see notes)

article first, not least because it is the shortest and simplest in the thesis it propounds. Briefly, it appears that he believes that the place of the Risen Christ is more central to John Smyth's ecclesiology than is, as I asserted, the theology of the covenant. No doubt some of the problem may lie with differing concepts of centrality, but it is clear from his article that I did not succeed in making myself entirely clear to at least one of my readers! However, I would still plead that a careful reading of the whole book and even of the chapter on John Smyth himself might make it evident that I was talking about a fundamental understanding of covenant theology rather than of, primarily, the importance of the actual church covenants or the act of making them among the Separatists. To have understood this would, I believe, have helped Dr Shantz. He might still feel it necessary to correct me, but at least would be correcting me for what I actually meant to say.

Before I explain what I believe the implications of this understanding of covenant theology by John Smyth and others to have been, I must first refer to some discussions about the nature of 16th and 17th century covenant theology which have taken place with some of my friends over the years in Oxford. These, I believe, tend to undercut and approach the question from a rather different point of view than either Dr Shantz or Dr Coggins. Some of them Dr Brachlow reflects upon and usefully extends in his article.

It has gradually become plain to one or two of us working in this field that, although virtually all shades of non-Roman Christians debating the doctrine of the Church in this period appealed to Scripture, none of them seems to have recognized or seems to have been able or willing to recognize the clash *in the Bible* between the 'Sinaitic' type of covenant thinking (the 'conditional' covenant) and the 'Davidic' (the 'unconditional' covenant). A modern work of Old Testament scholarship, John Bright's *History of Israel* (1960), brings this out effectively and convincingly from the point of view of contemporary studies. However, of course, no 16th or 17th century Bible student was equipped to recognize such a clash at the very heart of the theology of the ancient people of God. They assumed that there could only be *one* type of covenant theology to be discovered there. Hence it was fairly easy for them, as conflicting needs arose, almost unconsciously to slip from texts tending to emphasize one kind of covenant understanding to texts tending to emphasize another.

This meant, with everyone appealing with great confidence to Scripture for support, that both kinds of covenant theology could claim to be the *one* covenant theology which everyone assumed was there. Each controversialist merely selected a different batch of proof texts. Furthermore, as Dr Brachlow⁵ points out in his article, though not quite in these terms, the 'conditional' covenant thinking (that covenant blessing depended upon obedience by the people to its terms) was characteristic of the ecclesiology of theologians

on the offensive. This was so whether they were Presbyterian-Puritans attacking Episcopalians, Separatists attacking Presbyterian-Puritans, Baptists attacking Separatists, or, as I have discovered in the later 17th century, Quakers attacking Baptists. Moreover, the 'unconditional' understanding of the covenant (that God would bless his elect people even if they failed in their obedience) tended to be taken over by theologians on the defensive. Of course, the two biblical covenant theologies were not as simply black and white as this, but, broadly speaking, the distinction could be made as, in turn, Presbyterian-Puritans, Separatists and Baptists found themselves on the defensive. Each group, as they found themselves on the defensive against a group more radical than they, became, ironically enough, protagonists of the very type of covenant theology they had themselves attacked. Both represented a covenant of grace, in both God stoops to the utterly undeserving, but in one the stability of the covenant depends upon a measure of faithfulness from the people's side and in the other God keeps his merciful covenant with the elect however far they fall. Obviously the former understanding fits more happily with an 'arminian' type of theology and may even lead to it.

This idea, admittedly, has never been worked through in detail and would, perhaps, prove an interesting thesis subject. Of course, those of us who have been thinking along these lines would readily recognize (as does Dr Brachlow) that not *all* the conservatives nor *all* the radicals in a given ecclesiological conflict would share all the interpretations, or all their emphases or all their proof texts in the same way or at the same time. Nevertheless, it was against this kind of generalized understanding of the Separatist versus Presbyterian-Puritan clash that I first began to grasp what was happening in their debates about the nature of the Church. Obviously there is a close analogy here with discussions about 'preparationist' theology.⁶

To return to Dr Shantz: this whole understanding was the root cause of my belief that the reign of the Risen Christ over the Church (and later over the *baptized* congregation of believers) in John Smyth's thought was demanded as part of his understanding of the covenant as conditional in nature. If Christ were not allowed to reign, the central condition of the covenant could not be fulfilled. So, for John Smyth, it was the covenant which demanded the condition which was fundamental. I hope that Dr Shantz will forgive me if the passages in my writing which seemed to me so clear were more ambiguous than I realized.

Now let me turn to James Coggins and his article with which, of course, I largely agree, although there are one or two points where he seems mistaken. For example, he says, apparently in criticism of my discussion of the contents of Smyth's *Paralleles, Censures and Observations* that I believed that Smyth 'confused' the two covenants.' While he is less than entirely clear here, I think I must assume that this is a

somewhat careless reinterpretation of my carefully phrased remark that 'a certain ambivalence became almost characteristic of his Smyth's use of the term'.⁸ Dr Coggins then goes on to note that 'in fact Smyth hardly ever discussed covenant theology at all'.⁹ I entirely agree that this was so: it was as clear to me as it is to Dr Coggins that Smyth 'hardly ever discussed' covenant theology. This being the case, we must be the more careful in attempting to elucidate the significance of the term from his use of it in different contexts. This was what I attempted to do: that is why I wrote not of Smyth's 'discussion' but of his 'use' of the word.

It seems to me that both Dr Shantz and Dr Coggins need now to reconsider the whole question of covenant theology.

NOTES

- 1 Leonard Trinterud, 'The Origins of Puritanism', *Church History*, 1951, pp.37-57.
- 2 Joseph Ban, 'Were the Earliest English Baptists Anabaptists?', *The Great Tradition* (eds.) Ban and Dekar, 1982. This is a sound and judicious discussion of most of the issues involved.
- 3 James Coggins, 'The Theological Positions of John Smyth', *Baptist Quarterly*, XXX, 6.
- 4 Douglas Shantz, 'The Place of the Resurrected Christ in the Writings of John Smyth', *Baptist Quarterly*, XXX, 5.
- 5 Stephen Brachlow, 'Puritan Theology and General Baptist Origins', *Baptist Quarterly*, XXX, 7.
- 6 See Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared* (Yale, 1966) and R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford 1979).
- 7 Coggins, op.cit., 249.
- 8 B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition* (Oxford 1971), 128.
- 9 Coggins, *ibid.*

B. R. WHITE

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