

However, the positive contribution Clouser makes in answering objections to biblical RSP correlation need not be overshadowed by the questions raised above, and this clearly written book remains a helpful introduction to the issues involved.

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Coggins, James B. *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence and the Elect Nation*. Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1991. 232 pp. \$29.95.

In this well-documented study, James Coggins, the associate editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, provides a fascinating image not only of John Smyth's congregation but also of other Separatist groups in the Netherlands, as well as a clear description of the many strands of Anabaptism in that country at the beginning of the seventeenth century. In the process he dispels many common incorrect assumptions concerning the origins of the Baptist movement.

He shows, for instance, that the members of the Gainsborough Separatists, far from being an assortment of poor and uneducated people, had a solid core of members who could read and write. Almost all of them were literate enough to sign their names to the covenant, something which was not common in those days. Furthermore, the assembly included a significant number of ministers who had left their livings because of royal repression, which explains their insistence on the use of the original biblical languages in the pulpit.

A careful study of J. Smyth's theological development, the author also reveals, proves that he had accepted believers' baptism before he came in contact with the Dutch Anabaptists. Coggins also makes a strong point to support the belief that the division between the Leiden and the Amsterdam Separatist congregations occurred in the Netherlands, as a result of theological disagreements, rather than in England because of geographical separation.

The author gives careful attention to the break between J. Smyth and T. Helwys, which was due primarily to a heated dispute on the former's compliance to a "principle of baptismal succession," which had led him to seek rebaptism by the Mennonites, after he had already rebaptized himself. Helwys, on the other hand, stressed the importance of a "spiritual succession" and rejected anything that echoed of the apostolic succession of the Catholics and the Anglicans.

For many readers, the most significant element of this book is the better understanding of the Separatist "covenant church" concept which it sets forth. At the heart of that idea is the radical commitment to follow truth

wherever it might lead. New truth, it was taught, was not "thought up" but "made known," as the author says, which led to the very important concept of the "spiritual worship," a distinctive charismatic assembly during which God could open one's eyes to new truth.

This gave a new dimension to the opposition to the use of the *Book of Common Prayer*. In order to be fully open to new light, one had to be totally freed from preconceived understandings of Scripture. The worship with the *Book of Common Prayer*, however, made it totally impossible for the preacher to convey any message from the Holy Spirit. The same negative attitude also applied to the *Geneva Bible* with its many human footnotes. In fact, spiritual worship was much more likely to happen in a small rather than a large congregation, which, to some degree, explains why Smyth's congregation never sought fellowship with the English Ancient Church in Amsterdam. It was size that caused the downfall of churches, for it made true discipline impossible.

The revelation of new truth created a testing crisis for the believers. The Separatists believed that a sincere person was certain to grasp it. To turn away from it was a willful apostasy and moral evil. They had an unshakable assurance of possessing "the truth," as far as God had revealed it so far, but the belief in progressive revelation kept them humble in the expectancy of further light.

The book also provides interesting information on the many branches of Anabaptism in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century and their beliefs. It confirms the opinion that the movement was everything but the monolithic group still painted by some church historians. While there were serious differences in theology, it is important to note that, at that time, a Mennonite consciousness was developing, which led the Frisian Anabaptists to demand that their German brethren be consulted before admitting Smyth and his followers into their ranks.

Without question this book should be required reading for all who are interested in the development of the free churches. In light of the heated battle between Calvinists and Mennonites over Smyth's dependence upon or independence from his Anabaptist contacts, which is described in the first chapter, the willingness of the Mennonite Coggins to admit that a great deal of Smyth's theological development took place in England before he left for the Netherlands is especially remarkable.