

Jason K. Lee. *The Theology of John Smyth: Puritan, Separatist, Baptist, Anabaptist*, Baptists: History, Literature, Theology, Hymns. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003. Pp. xiv, 310. \$40.00. Hardback.

As Richard Land observed in his 1979 DPhil thesis, the “careful examination of one man, and his interaction with his society and with the views and opinions of his contemporaries, can be of value in understanding the historical and theological development of [the] period,” (“Doctrinal Controversies of English Particular Baptists (1644–1791) as Illustrated by the Career and Writings of Thomas Collier,” Oxford University, 3). This approach of examining “one man” serves Jason K. Lee and his readers well in the publication, *The Theology of John Smyth*. Currently Associate Professor of Historical Theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Lee’s work on John Smyth (c.1577–1612) originated as the focus of his PhD studies at the University of Aberdeen.

Lee asserts that John Smyth was “responsible for organizing the first group of English Baptists” (1). Even though Smyth was a Baptist for less than two years, it is Lee’s purpose to draw conclusions “about Smyth’s theology, about the influences on him, and about his impact on his followers and opponents” (xi). Specifically, Lee evaluates the 1984 *Baptist Quarterly* conversation between four scholars who sought to identify the central theme in Smyth’s theology. Seeing their discussion as “beginning points in understanding Smyth’s theology,” Lee recognizes the opportunity to offer his examination of Smyth in an effort to answer the questions raised (xiv).

The first two chapters provide the biographical context for the examination of Smyth’s theology. Lee explains that he intends to follow both a dynamic and organic approach to the consideration of Smyth. The study is dynamic in the sense that Lee finds Smyth to share theological ideas with many, both past and present, even though strong historical ties may not be found. But, Lee also takes advantage of the organic materials available in doctrinal statements and other published writings that connect Smyth concretely to others around him. The result is an original and helpful first chapter that presents a survey of English Dissenters and Separatists as well as Dutch Anabaptists and Mennonites.

Lee’s survey of Smyth’s life raises several questions and then provides the answers. How does a man trained in the Puritan tradition eschew after only fifteen years the core of his initial theology? Smyth’s militant pursuit of the truth as he came to understand it saw him reject Puritan affiliation with the Church of England and join the Separatists. Soon, his embrace of believer’s baptism led to his abandoning the Separatists in favor of a new Baptist movement. However, life with the Mennonites so enamored him that within months he saw his Baptist friends depart and he fashioned himself a new theological identity. Following Lee’s presentation of Smyth’s theological and life evolution is like riding in the front car of a jolting rollercoaster. Lee secures all the details of a complicated life together and fastens them carefully on the twin tracks of theological and historical inquiry only to let Smyth himself take the reader through the tumultuous hills and valleys of his shifting views.

Chapter three begins the theological evaluation and Lee starts with a look at Smyth’s use of typology. Explaining that Smyth primarily uses typology in the interpretation of Scripture and in his efforts of theological defense, Lee reveals how essential an understanding of Smyth’s typology is for an assessment of Smyth’s theology. Smyth employs the tool of typology throughout his life until he becomes a Mennonite—a reoccurring theme for all of Smyth’s

theology. Lee's work in this chapter is constructed entirely from the original sources and provides a steady foundation for the further theological exploration.

Chapter four investigates the role of covenant in Smyth's theology. While certainly integral to Smyth's thinking, Lee argues that it is not as central as English Baptist historian B.R. White claims. White focused on Smyth's use of covenant as a Separatist and a Baptist, but as Lee shows, Smyth, by the end of his life, has moved further away from considering covenant as central. This chapter is a valuable aid to the modern resurgence of ecclesiological inquiry as it traces both the role of covenant as the Separatist entrance to the local church and the replacement of that understanding by the adoption of believer's baptism by the Baptists.

The theological spectrum in the early seventeenth century could not contain further opposite ends than those of Reformed and Arminian. The theological heirs of John Calvin had propagated their system to the point that Smyth's years at Cambridge provided a clear Reformed theological foundation. How did Smyth then come to reject these Reformed views? Lee carefully considers this question in chapter five. While no simple answer can be supplied, Lee argues that Smyth's dealings with the Mennonites proved very persuasive and although often overlooked, it appears that Smyth came to his conclusions after considering Hans de Ries's "Short Confession." Lee's work in this chapter is thorough, but his use of the traditional five points of Calvinism as the rubric to evaluate Smyth's Reformed theology seems out of place. Because the five points were not systematized until the 1618–19 response to the Arminian Remonstrances at Dort, organizing Smyth's theology around the Dortian points, while helpful, is a bit anachronistic.

Chapter six presents the crux of Smyth's theological derivations. Lee explains that Smyth's Christology essentially underwent no change until Smyth met with the Mennonites. The Mennonites were connected with the views of Melchior Hoffman who believed that Christ did not partake of human flesh at his birth, but rather brought his own divine flesh from heaven. Many have questioned whether or not Smyth ever embraced Melchiorite Christology, but Lee painstakingly shows that while Smyth extends tolerance to those who hold this view, he himself never reached that conclusion. However, Smyth does align himself with the nuanced views of Ries and Caspar Schwenckfeld, which are a good distance removed from his Puritan beginnings.

Lee's final chapter provides another original construction of an aspect of Smyth's theology as it relates to his understanding of church and state. By the time Smyth has joined the Mennonites he has come to the place of seeing a great division between temporal and spiritual matters, and therefore the state should have no control over matters of faith (281). This early view of religious toleration, Lee shows, would influence Smyth's Baptist partner, Thomas Helwys, as Helwys later writes one of the first treatises on religious liberty, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1612).

While Lee presents that it is the Mennonite doctrinal influence that generates the greatest change in the theology of John Smyth, it is also clear that Smyth left a theological legacy with the groups of believers who would become the first General Baptists in England. This, Lee argues, is how Smyth, who never founded a Baptist church on English soil, is still considered the father of these Baptists. As the 400th anniversary of John Smyth's baptism approaches, Jason K. Lee has provided twenty-first century Baptists with a thorough and original examination of the theology of the first Baptist Englishman—even while accurately recognizing that Smyth's Baptist contribution was just a stop on an evolving theological rollercoaster.

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