

Joe Early Jr., ed., *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009. Pp. xviii, 328. \$45.00. Hardback.

Richard Groves ed., *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998. Pp. xxxiv, 156. \$35.00. Hardback.

Across from the Central Criminal Court building in downtown London, a historical marker hangs without fanfare but nonetheless calls to all those who have an affinity for anything old and Baptist. At the corner of Newgate Street and Old Bailey, the small blue placard reads, "Site of Newgate, Demolished 1777." While no physical structure remains, the famous Newgate Prison once served to accommodate many enemies of the state during its lifetime, including the patriarch English Baptist leader, Thomas Helwys. Likely Helwys' final dwelling before his death in or before 1616, the Newgate Prison maker functions as a memorial of sorts for anyone wishing to recognize the life of the pioneer General Baptist.

On the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the beginnings of English Baptists (1609-2009), Joe Early seeks to honor and remember the early protector of the first Baptist congregation and the one who ensured their safe arrival on English soil in 1612. *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys* arrives to the welcome of many as the memory of Helwys has rested too long in the shadow of his early pastor, John Smyth. Not since Richard Groves' helpful, edited volume of Helwys' work, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* in 1998, has this work of Helwys appeared in modern printed form. More than that, Early provides a lengthy section on Helwys' life followed by a newly typeset collection of the remainder of Helwys' works.

Joe Early Jr. serves as the Assistant Professor of Religion at the University of the Carolinas. In *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys*, he provides a compilation of all the known writings of Helwys "translated from either early modern English or Latin into modern English" (xvii). Early's work joins others like it in Mercer University Press' new "Early English Baptist Texts" series designed to "inject new dynamism to Baptist theology" (iii). Mercer's intent of providing primary sources for theological reflection and engagement should be applauded and this reviewer hopes their investment in this project will only multiply for generations to come.

Early's first section surveys Helwys' life starting with an overview of the events leading to Reformation in England. From the reign of Henry VIII (and his wives) to his daughter, Elizabeth, coupled with the impatient movement of some from Puritanism to Separatism, Early covers well the basic historiography. Early then takes up the Helwys narrative informing the reader of Helwys' wealthy upbringing and the decision of his father to send him to study law in London. Early's biographical prose here is well done and clear, but largely he is compiling and ordering the facts discovered and presented in the last century by Baptist scholars W. T. Whitley and Ernest Payne. The story follows Helwys through his embrace of Puritanism and his introduction to a recent Cambridge graduate and preacher, John Smyth. Smyth and Helwys' friendship leads to their joining a Separatist congregation in Gainesborough. The Gainesborough church could not evade the ecclesiastical strictures enforced by Elizabeth I and, after dividing, they sought asylum in Holland. Early notes that Helwys likely was the financier of the congregation's move (19).

Life in Amsterdam brought many developments, not the least of which was the increasing persuasion of Pastor Smyth that "one must confess Christ before accepting baptism" (23). Such

thinking led to the birth of the first Baptist church in 1609. Troubled in mind over whether their independent baptism did, indeed, create a true church, Smyth wavered and pressed for the congregation to admit their error and join the local group of Mennonites. At this juncture, Helwys followed his pastor no farther. What began as a friendship a decade before now found an end over significant doctrinal disagreements. Early's presentation of the events and issues that constituted the separation comes together excellently with detail and precision (25-35). Helwys and Smyth engaged in a war of words, each writing statements of faith and then responding in kind to the other's differing doctrines. Through this process Helwys grew convicted that he was in error to have left his home country for sake of safety alone. In 1612, Helwys and those who would follow him returned to London and established the first Baptist church on English soil in Spitalfields just outside the city walls (41). Smyth would continue to seek alliance with the Mennonites while fluctuating in his doctrinal commitments until his death in 1612. While Smyth often receives recognition as the progenitor of English Baptists, Early's work shows that likely that would not have occurred without the support of Helwys (49). Furthermore, when one compares Smyth's instability with Helwys' strengthening convictions, Baptists are left to see not Smyth, nor Smyth and Helwys, but, rather, Helwys alone as the true foundation builder of Baptist life in England.

Early's second section comprises the remaining eighty-five percent of the book and contains the entirety of Helwys' extant documents. Eight enumerated items are introduced by Early with a short explanatory paragraph. They include, (1) Helwys' first letter from Holland to friends and family in England on September 26, 1608. The letter provides insight into ecclesiological differences they had with other English Separatist groups. (2) Second, Early provides Helwys' letter to the Mennonite congregation in Amsterdam after his break with Smyth. The letter serves as a warning to the Mennonites of Smyth's vacillating behavior and requested that they not accept Smyth for membership. (3) Third, a letter of March 12, 1610 declares to the Mennonites that Helwys and his followers are no longer connected with Smyth. (4) Fourth, Early presents Helwys's first "Confession of Faith" written in 1610 for the purpose of stating his church's beliefs contrary to Smyth. Originally penned in Latin, Early provides an English translation. (5) Early next includes a more extensive "Declaration of Faith" that Helwys crafted in 1611 following the 1610 prototype. This document holds the distinction as the first English Baptist confession of faith and explicates the differences of belief between the Helwys and Smyth congregations in twenty-seven articles. (6) Sixth, Early provides Helwys' "A Short and Plaine Proof by the Word and Works of God that God's Decree is not the Cause of Any of Man's Sins or Condemnation." In this work, Helwys shows the ways in which his time in Amsterdam under the influence of the Mennonites altered the Puritan-Calvinism he followed in England, leading him to embrace the doctrines of Arminianism, especially with regard to the electing providences of God. The work, Helwys states, came as an expansion of his fifth article in his "Declaration of Faith." In short, Helwys labors to show that God did not determine some men to be wicked, but that man, through his actions, brings condemnation upon himself. (7) Seventh, Early presents Helwys' "An Advertisement" written to all the churches in areas surrounding Holland. Helwys works to refute, in four parts, the major errors of the Mennonite theology including Christological heresy and ecclesiological successionism through baptism—one of the chief areas of disagreement with Smyth. Published in 1611 while in Amsterdam, Helwys' "Advertisement" was written in Dutch and published in English.

The final document (8) receives special attention as Helwys' "A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity" rests as his most famous work and arguably his most significant and long-

lasting contribution. Written while in Amsterdam, Helwys had copies in his possession when he returned to England. While written to address the errors of the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, Puritanism, and Separatism, Helwys' chief aim was the call for religious freedom for all whether they be "heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever" (209). Such an address, Early notes, made "A Short Declaration" the "first appeal in the English language for complete religious liberty," and therefore serves as a benchmark for the heritage of Baptists regardless of how one aligns with the rest of Helwys' theological advancements (42). Helwys' boldness intensified when he sent King James I an autographed copy of the work, an action Early explains was interpreted as treasonous and saw to Helwys' arrest and transfer to his final home in Newgate (43-44).

When one compares Early's edition of "A Short Declaration" with Richard Groves' work (also published by Mercer), there does not appear many differences, although this reviewer found it odd that Early did not cite Groves in his work either in the body or in the bibliography. Both editors sought to provide a modernized edition of the text and both succeeded in producing a readable copy. Groves also includes a helpful historical introduction that contains an extensive overview of "A Short Declaration." However, Early's inclusion of Helwys' other writings, combined with his well written biographical introduction gives the reader a single volume resource for all of Helwys' materials. Many are indebted to Groves, and, as such, should acknowledge his fine contribution, but Early's volume has naturally risen as an improved replacement.

One final postscript. In Early's introduction he sates,

From the first Baptists in the early seventeenth century to the Baptists of the twenty-first century, all maintain some commitment to the Baptist distinctives of biblical authority, autonomy of the local church, priesthood of all believers, the two ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, individual responsibility (soul competency), separation of church and state, and the two offices of pastor and deacon [Early notes these form the acrostic BAPTIST]. Some of these distinctives may not be maintained by all groups with as much diligence as in the past, but together these distinctives still differentiate Baptists from other Christian denominations. Nearly 400 years ago Thomas Helwys outlined these distinctives in his writings (xvi).

While admitting there exists some discrepancy over what has constituted or what comprises a list of Baptist distinctives, this reviewer fails to see Helwys outlining all of Early's list of distinctives in his writings. For example, the doctrine of soul competency popularized by E. Y. Mullins in the early twentieth century would have been foreign to Helwys. In addition, with regard to biblical authority, scholars such as Russ Bush and Tom Nettles have, in recent years, shown that how one defines that term determines whether or not current Baptists are in line with what Baptist like Helwys believed and espoused. Early commits no great error by stating the above in his introduction, as those comments remain there and are not restated throughout as an interpretive grid for the collection of Helwys' works that follow. Nevertheless, as Stan Norman and others have shown, there exists in Baptist history two streams of thought: the Reformation-Confessional stream dating back to the sixteenth century and the Enlightenment-Experience stream connected with the interpreters of Mullins in the twentieth. To intimate that Helwys outlines the latter without mentioning the former only detracts from an otherwise exceptional volume.

Through the service of Richard Groves and now Joe Early, thankfully the legacy of Thomas Helwys has avoided the epitaph now hanging outside the remnants of his prison home. While the blue sign hidden on a wall in London reads, “Site of Newgate, Demolished 1777” thankfully the same cannot now be said about the life and work of Thomas Helwys.

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