

Jason K. Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth: Puritan, Separatist, Baptist, Anabaptist*, Mercer University Press, 2003, pp. 310. Reviewed by Aaron D. Weaver.

Where do Baptists come from? The answer to this popular question likely depends on who you ask. In *The Theology of John Smyth*, historical theologian Jason Lee attempts to shed a bit of light on this question through a comprehensive study of the life and writings of John Smyth who historians regard as the founder of the first ever Baptist church. In his investigation, Lee divides Smyth's career into four distinct stages: Puritan, Separatist, Baptist and Mennonite. Through seven chapters, Lee presents a contextualized understanding of Smyth's theology. Chapters focus on topics such as Smyth's view of covenant, atonement, Christology and church-state relations.

Chapter 1 offers a brief overview of both the English Puritan-Separatist and Dutch Mennonite backgrounds that influenced the theology of John Smyth. As Lee correctly notes, "An informed discussion of Smyth's theological pilgrimage necessitates at least a working knowledge of English and Dutch climates" (xii). By focusing on key English dissenters such as Robert Browne, Henry Barrow, Francis Johnson and Henry Ainsworth, Lee provides a useful introduction into the world of the sixteenth century English Radicals and English Separatists who he contends had at least an indirect influence on John Smyth. Similarly, Lee examines the sixteenth century Dutch Anabaptist leaders such as Melchior Hoffman and Dirk Philips whose thought and practice impacted the sixteenth century and early seventeenth century Dutch environment that also shaped John Smyth's views.

Chapter 2 presents a concise but comprehensive study of Smyth's life, debates and writings. Lee argues that Smyth went through four distinct theological stages in his life. These include a Puritan stage, a Separatist stage, a Baptist stage and finally a Mennonite stage. For each stage, Lee analyzes different writings of Smyth. Unlike many historians, Lee does not acknowledge Smyth's original theological stage as an Anglican. Instead, he lumps Smyth's days as an Anglican under the Puritan stage. Further, while classifications of theological stages are helpful and necessary, they are hardly as "distinct" as Lee maintains. However, whether Smyth went through four distinct stages or five stages, Lee's presentation of Smyth's rollercoaster ride of a life leaves the reader wondering how a trained Puritan minister could change his theology so much in such a short period of time? Living out *sola Scriptura* lent itself to diversity.

Chapters 3-7 offer a theological evaluation of Smyth. Chapter 3 highlights Smyth's use of typology in his writings. Lee shows how Smyth uses typology in the interpretation of Scripture. Consequently, an understanding of Smyth's typology is required in order to make an accurate assessment of Smyth's theology. Unique from other chapters in this book, Lee's analysis of Smyth's typology is created completely from all original sources. Chapter 4 focuses on the idea of "covenant" which Lee emphasizes is a concept that dominates Smyth's writings. Lee chronicles Smyth's evolving use of "covenant" throughout each of his four theological stages. Lee demonstrates how Smyth uses the term "covenant" differently in each stage. For instance, as a Separatist, Smyth uses "covenant" to describe the appropriate manner of establishing a true church. However, as a Baptist, Smyth uses "covenant" in his ecclesiological discussion of the carnal covenant and spiritual covenant which he links to believers' baptism. He concludes that the carnal covenant of the Old Testament should not be continued in the New Testament church. This chapter makes a contribution to understanding the relationship between covenant, believer's baptism and church membership in early Baptist life as well as to the growing interest in Baptist understandings of the nature of the church.

Chapter 5 chronicles Smyth's early support and later rejection of Reformed theology. Lee argues that Smyth's writings as a Puritan, Separatist and Baptist all reveal his Reformed views. According to Lee, only when Smyth began to accept Mennonite theology did he repudiate

Reformed beliefs such as the doctrines of predestination, total depravity, irresistible grace and limited atonement and, consequently, come to accept the doctrine of general atonement. This rejection of limited atonement in favor of the Mennonite view of general atonement was a significant shift in Smyth's theology.

Chapter 6 examines Smyth's Christology. Lee maintains that Smyth's view of Christ as a Puritan, Separatist and Baptist did not change until Smyth entered his Mennonite stage. Other Baptist historians have alleged that Smyth ultimately embraced the docetic view of Christ's "celestial flesh" advocated by Melchior Hoffman who believed that Christ did not receive human flesh through his birth, but had a divine flesh from heaven. Lee rejects this claim. He argues convincingly that Smyth was uncertain on the nature of Christ's flesh and as a result never made any definitive statements about the incarnation. He also notes that Smyth remained tolerant of those who held to differing views of Christ, including the doctrinally suspect view of Hoffman. For a man who was extremely adamant in his convictions on theological issues such as baptism, it's quite curious that Smyth would be so tolerant on views pertaining to the nature of Christ. Unfortunately, Lee does not explore this uncharacteristically high level of tolerance in any detail.

In the seventh and final chapter, Lee analyzes John Smyth's understanding of the relationship between church and state. Lee observes that Smyth's views and writings on church and state progressed and changed throughout his career. Lee explains that Smyth's views on church and state from his Separatist writings did not change drastically during his Baptist stage of life. During this period, Smyth continued to support only limited separation between church and state. However, during his Mennonite stage, Smyth issues a clarion call for both religious liberty and the separation of church and state. Throughout this final chapter, Lee points to the many similarities between the church-state views of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys as proof that Smyth likely influenced Helwys who carried back these views to England. According to Lee, both Smyth and Helwys saw "civil matters as a part of an earthly kingdom, where matters of faith are left for Christ and the spiritual kingdom." For decades, historians have consistently argued that Helwys clung to a much more radical view of religious freedom than did John Smyth. While acknowledging that Helwys was a stronger advocate in this arena than Smyth, Lee downplays the significance of these differences to the detriment of his own thesis.

Throughout the book, Lee makes a well-reasoned case for "the definitive influence of the Mennonites on Smyth" (289). Lee concludes that among Smyth's theological shifts in his pursuit of truth, the acceptance of Mennonite doctrine was his greatest change. However, at times Lee reaches too far and makes radical assertions concerning the influence of Mennonite doctrine on Thomas Helwys' theology. If there exists a case for strong Mennonite influence on Helwys and the General Baptists, Lee failed to make that case.

Jason Lee's *The Theology of John Smyth* is indeed well written and as the first monograph written solely on the first English Baptist, it is most definitely a unique contribution to the study of Baptist history. Lee's careful use of primary sources demonstrates that he is a first class scholar. However, *The Theology of John Smyth* has one significant downfall: it is dreadfully difficult to read. It reads and is organized like a dissertation. Mercer University Press should have sought greater revisions to facilitate the flow of the text. Despite its flaws, Jason Lee's *The Theology of John Smyth* deserves a place on the shelves of all *serious* students of Baptist origins.