

The English Church at Amsterdam.¹

BY their successful rebellion in the years between 1570 and 1580 against their hereditary reigning lord, the Roman Catholic King of Spain, the Lowlands laid the foundation of their liberty and of the dominion of tolerance in matters of religion.

This tolerance—heritage of their great Prince William of Orange—would be their glory and fame in the coming ages and would make Holland the promised land of all who were persecuted and oppressed in their own countries for their faith: Lutherans from Germany, Calvinists from France, Jews from Spain and Poland, and also Puritans and Brownists from England. In England the liberal attitude of the government was totally reversed between 1570 and 1580. In the year 1570 a colony of some thousands of Mennonites, who had fled from Holland, enjoyed hospitality in Norwich. There it was that Robert Browne made his acquaintance with them, and was deeply impressed by their Church organisation, their strong, living faith, their independency, rejection of hierarchy, liberty to choose teachers and deacons, striving after conformity to the Kingdom of God, high moral standards and Church discipline. Consequently when, ten years later, Browne could no longer remain in England he sought and found safety in Middelburg in the Dutch province of Zeeland.

In the end, Browne forsook the cause for which he had suffered oppression and imprisonment, and returned into the lap of the Episcopalian Church. But the seed which he had sown in the souls of his followers, who were called Brownists and to their annoyance could not get rid of that name, bore its fruit. Against them the persecutions increased in vehemence; the prisons became crowded, and in 1593 some went to their deaths. Those who were still at liberty contemplated leaving their country for happier regions abroad as soon as opportunity arose. This required laborious preparation. The first group settled in 1593 in Amsterdam, the most tolerant city in the free Lowlands. The leader was Henry Ainsworth, a young man of twenty-two, who in spite of his youth was characterised by cautiousness, care for the flock, and tough perseverance. He was a simple yet striking preacher, and, according to famous philologists of the Leyden

¹ An address given to a gathering of Baptists during the Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam.

University, an unsurpassed scholar in Hebrew. But he was praised most of all for his modest, humble, patient character. Above all the waves of quarrels and struggles which mark the history of the Brownists in Amsterdam his figure appears like a beacon of quiet and peaceful light. His scholarship is still seen in many exegetic writings which came from his pen; while his godliness blesses us to this day as we read his confession of faith, expressed in forty-five articles, which he drew up in 1596.

In 1597 a number of prominent fugitives joined the Church of Ainsworth. Among these were Francis Johnson and his beloved wife, and also his brother, George Johnson, who disliked his sister-in-law because in his opinion she dressed too luxuriously. To Ainsworth as teacher Francis was added as pastor. How their hearts were grieved when the learned but not very noble-minded elder, Slade, joined the Reformed Church in order to obtain the position of co-rector of the Latin school! This gave rise to polemics which disturbed the friendly relations within the Church. Hidden and open attacks from Reformed ministers and churchwardens multiplied. At last Ainsworth and Johnson decided not to hide any longer the conscientious objections they held against the Reformed Church—the use of former Roman Catholic buildings, infection by the spirit of anti-Christ, baptism of children of non-church members, fixed forms of prayer, the reading of sermons (as sermons and prayers must come from the heart), indifference to the application of Church discipline as a result of the size of the churches, which made oversight impossible. They for themselves wished no church larger than three hundred members. Above that number a new church ought to be formed. All these objections reveal a mentality closely resembling that of the Mennonites. No wonder that the Brownists were united with this brotherhood in bonds of real friendship and appreciation. Those bonds grew even stronger now they had lost the friendship of the Reformed Church. The attacks of the Reformed Church did them little harm. What injured them most was the enemy within. It was the calamitous struggle between the brothers Francis and George, which ended not only in the excommunication of George but even of his seventy-year-old father who had come over from England to reconcile his sons, and who refused to give up even after his excommunication. Our sympathies are not on the side of the ambitious Francis, but Ainsworth stood at his side, counselling moderation. But the fact cannot be denied that with George's departure the unrest disappeared.

The church now enjoyed eight years of rest. Both pastors were attached to each other as well as to the members. They were one in faith and one in the desire to return to England, which seemed possible after the ascension to the throne of James

I in 1603. They remained also one in disappointment when the King changed his attitude and turned to the Episcopalians. Now they foresaw that they would have to remain in Amsterdam for some length of time. They considered it necessary to look for a better place of worship. Where they had thus far met we do not know. All we are sure of is that they gathered in a shed in a blind alley. In 1607 they built a house of prayer in Lange Houtstraat near Waterloo Square. When the building was only half completed a hurricane smote it down—a sign from God, according to the minister of the Presbyterians, that it was not built on the true rock. The Brownists did not accept this interpretation. They started again to build, and finished a house which served their assemblies for many a year. New refugees from England gave the church an increase in members as well as in friends. In order not to become too large, however, the church could not accept new members any longer when, in 1606, John Smyth with almost the entire membership of the Brownist Church at Gainsborough came to Amsterdam. John Smyth, therefore, kept his church apart from that of Ainsworth and Johnson, but both churches lived in close friendship with each other. Smyth, who earned his living as a physician and for his quiet ways enjoyed the confidence of all, was in matters of religion a seeker. He would not hesitate to abandon an accepted truth openly and honestly if new light broke upon his heart. In this respect he differed from the ambitious Johnson, who was apparently a headstrong man. A conflict between them was unavoidable. But when it did break it was not he but Johnson who adopted the new, while Smyth clung to the old. It concerned the government of the church. Before this, government was in the hands of all the members united; the deacons were in spiritual matters advisers only and in material matters an executive body. Johnson wanted all authority in the church, including the appointment of teachers, elders and deacons, to be vested in the churchwardens. For, said he, it is impossible for the church as a whole to express itself. Does not the Apostle Paul rule that the sisters ought to be silent? It was not so much consideration of the ladies which constrained Johnson as the desire to strengthen his own position. He met great opposition in his own church, and in the sister church the opposition grew so strong that Smyth decided to have nothing more to do with him. In Johnson's own church, Ainsworth took the side of the opposition. Having worked in harmony for so many years the two men now became estranged from each other. At the end of 1612 Ainsworth separated himself from the church, and was immediately excommunicated by Johnson. It was a heavy blow for Johnson, however, that the magistrate recognised Ainsworth and his followers as the rightful owners of the church

and the surrounding houses. Johnson left Amsterdam and went to Emden, but returned to Amsterdam soon afterwards and applied for membership of the Reformed Church, but had not yet been accepted when death overtook him in January, 1618. He died a broken man, far from his homeland. The Church of Ainsworth lived about a century. He himself died in 1622. His successor, John Canne, returned to England in 1640, and when the church had decreased to only five members, it united with the Presbyterian Church in 1702.

After long and careful consideration it became clear to John Smyth that the baptism of children, which the Brownists accepted as valid for the children of members only, was not in accordance with the Scriptures. He saw himself now as an unbaptised Christian. But where was he to look for baptism? Where was the true Church of the Lord? Matthew xviii, 20, where Jesus says: "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name there am I in the midst of them," saved him out of his difficulties. That word could only mean that two persons, though not baptised and not linked with a church, were demanded to baptise themselves and form a church in this way. It was even their duty to act as such if there were no true church. And in a solemn service in October, 1608, he first confessed his faith and then baptised himself. Next he listened to the confessions of faith of his friends and baptised them. The first Church of English Mennonites or Teleio-Baptists was born. Against the nick-name of Se-Baptist, eagerly given him by his adversaries, he defended himself in a writing on baptism eloquently entitled, *The Character of the Beast*. The beast was the beast of the Book of Revelation and its feature the baptism of children!

The new church needed first of all a suitable meeting-place. Smyth found this in an empty building near the Amstel, and in a new south-east corner of the city. It was about ten years old and had served as a bake-house of the Dutch East India Company. It had given its name to the neighbouring street, the Bakhuisstraat or Bakinghouse Street, later, Bakkerrstraat or Baker Street. The Company had sold it to Jan Munter in 1603. Smyth rented the bake-house from the new owner, as well as the neighbouring small dwellings in which had once lived the baker's men and into which now the fresh-baked Mennonites moved. But this material contact with Munter had spiritual results. Jan Munter belonged to the Waterland-Mennonites, and it was through him that Smyth came into contact with that church. And it was in this church that he recognised the true Church of Christ. This discovery brought him pain, for it became clear to him that his own baptism of half a year ago, and which he had carried out because there was no true Church of the Lord, was out of order and false. He

now desired his followers and himself to be received into membership of the Waterland church and to receive the true baptism. It was required that he first confess his sins about his heedless self-baptism. He was fully prepared for that, but not all his church were willing to follow him in this step. Ten members, with Helwys as their leader, refused to regard their baptism as null and void. Even the proposal to regard their differences as an *adiaphoron*, of which each might hold his own view in the liberty of Christ, was rejected. The parties were irreconcilable and the old weapons were handled once again. Helwys, though with bleeding heart, expelled Smyth and his friends from the church, though he could not with his small numbers crowd them out of the bakehouse. Under these circumstances the Waterland churchwardens hesitated to accept the excommunicated brethren. Smyth requested that the problem should be laid before the church. But it appeared that there were some in the church who made objections. Since 1602 the Waterlanders were linked up with the Friesian-German Church and this group, less broad-minded than the Waterlanders, were strongly suspicious of England. Other churches in the country, on being asked for their advice, were not encouraging. Consequently Smyth withdrew his request. This disappointment weighed heavily upon him. His life was drawing to an end. A higher peace spread over his thinking and preaching. "Let us not quarrel—not about baptism, nor about mint, anise and cummin, but let us hold to the truth in contrition, in faith, in regeneration." At the end of August, 1612, he died and was buried in the Nieuwe Kerk. His church honoured his memory by preserving peace and striving after union with the friendly Waterlanders. The objections against the self-baptism had fallen away now, while the objections from the Dutch side were eventually dropped when in 1613 the union with the Germans and the Friesians was dissolved. Discussions were taken up again and though they were marked by a Mennonite and tedious cautiousness they led to the desired results. "In a public meeting in the Bakehouse on January 21st, 1615, were the English admitted to our fellowship. May God keep them there unto blessedness."

How I would have played on your feelings if we were here gathered on the spot where 335 years ago this solemn happening had taken place! But this pleasure must be foregone. This church belonged to the Flemish Mennonites. The Waterlanders had their services in a more northern direction on the Singel near Torenhuis. In the beginning the English held their services in the bakehouse for the sake of language. In 1640 they were sufficiently acquainted with Dutch to unite with the Waterlanders in all things and also in their services. The bakehouse was left,

but a narrow and winding alley preserves in its name Engelse Steeg, English Alley, the memory of these pious Britons for the present generation. Meanwhile Thomas Helwys and his small flock maintained themselves as a separate church after his departure in 1608. Soon the fatal question about baptism would fade in their hearts in the light of another, viz. "May a Christian in times of persecution for the sake of faith flee from his fatherland?" This question became very pressing because their labours in Amsterdam bore little or no fruit. Thus they had to return to England, facing martyrdom if need be, in order to preach to their fellow-countrymen the true faith, the Mennonite beliefs. Once taken the decision was carried out immediately. In 1611 they were already in England and started in spoken and written word to publish their views on baptism and religious liberty. Their labours bore a rich harvest. Helwys seems to have died shortly after this, but his work was continued and spread under Brownists and Independents in spite of persecution and internal strife. A great Mennonite brotherhood of the same spirit as that in the Lowlands was about to be born. But according to the counsels of God it was not to be. Another problem, but now about the mode of baptism, presented itself and led the development in other ways. When one of them, Edward Barber, taught that not the usually practised form of sprinkling but baptism by immersion only was to be regarded as valid he won many adherents. Since 1643 complete churches introduced baptism by immersion. The tie with the Dutch, who maintained the old mode, broke away; the brotherhood of Baptists had arisen, far from Amsterdam but as a shoot from the stem of the Mennonites in Amsterdam. And when this evening Baptists from various parts of the world have undertaken a pilgrimage to a Mennonite church in the capital of our country and there are welcomed by Mennonite sisters and brothers, then we may taste—in spite of many differences—from the strength of our common history, something of the higher unity which binds us together as children of God. May, according to the words of the Waterland pastor, spoken when the English Teleio-Baptists were admitted to the fellowship, the Lord keep us in that unity unto blessedness. Amen.

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