

## \*BAPTIST HERITAGE\*

## The First English Baptist Church

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Where do Baptists originate? For many years, this has been a debated topic among Baptists of all persuasions, but one thing is certain—the first English Baptist church did not originate on English soil but in Holland.

In 1608, a small group of English Separatists led by pastor John Smyth and leading layman Thomas Helwys, fled persecution to the shores of the Netherlands. In Amsterdam, these Separatists became convinced that the separation from the Church of England included a rejection of infant baptism. In 1609, after much prayer and study, Smyth took the radical step of baptizing himself and then baptizing the other members of the congregation. The basis of church membership was a confession of faith in Christ and believer's baptism. Later, Smyth came to believe that he had erred in "se-baptism," and he and part of the congregation applied to a nearby Mennonite congregation for membership. Before they could be accepted, however, Smyth died of consumption at the age of forty-five. His followers ultimately were accepted into the Mennonite fellowship. A smaller remnant, led by Helwys, returned to England in 1612 and established the first Baptist church in Spitalfields, just outside London. They returned to England in the full knowledge that they would certainly be persecuted for their beliefs.

Despite the short-lived nature of Smyth's Baptist ministry and the split that occurred in this first English Baptist church, Smyth and these early Baptists made several contributions to Baptist life. As Leon McBeth writes in *The Baptist Heritage*, they are "the first identifiable Baptist church of modern times." As such, they became the first English Christians to emphasize the need for believer's baptism. Smyth and Helwys each became the first English proponents for the concept of separation of church and state. In a confession of faith Smyth wrote, "that the magistrate is not . . . to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion or doctrine: but to leave the Christian religion free to every man's conscience. . . ." Helwys subsequently reinforced this concept in his *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*. Helwys wrote, "the king is but an earthly king, and he hath no authority as a king but in earthly causes . . . for men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves. . . . Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure." Finally, while Smyth's followers who joined the Mennonites vanish from the records, the Helwys congregation founded the General Baptist movement in England approximately three decades before the first Particular Baptist churches were founded.

Modern day Baptists owe a part of our great heritage to this first English Baptist church.



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