

John Smyth and Thomas Helwys: Improvising Grace

Matthew 10:5-22

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And preach as you go, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Baptists began in a bakery, perhaps that's why most of us (particularly the Southern variety) still can't pass one without stopping. The first Baptist church in the history of the world began in the East India Bakehouse in Amsterdam. The little group who lived and worked in the bakery had come from England in 1607 to escape persecution rampant there against religious dissenters. Their leader, John Smyth, was a separatist who had left the Church of England, convinced it was no longer a true church of Christ. In England Smyth had kept company with another group of separatists some of whom climbed on a ship called the Mayflower in 1620, as pilgrims to the new world.

In Amsterdam they met for a time with a separatist congregation called Ancient Church because of their desire to model only the New Testament. Yet Smyth and company soon split with the Ancient Church over various doctrines, thereby setting another tradition for Baptists who continue to multiply by dividing. Smyth was a purist who believed that no printed books, hymns, prayers or sermons should be used in worship. Genuine worship was completely spontaneous, from the heart, no human creation. He even refused to allow reading from scripture in worship since English translations were a corruption of the true word of God.¹

By 1609, Smyth and Thomas Helwys, another leader of the little band, became convinced that the church should be composed only of adult believers who received baptism on the basis of their personal declaration of faith. Thus infant baptism, retained by most of the English separatists, was unacceptable in the true church. That same year, they made a fateful decision. Their own records describe their historic action:

Pastor and deacons laid down their office, the church disbanded or avowed itself no

church, and all stood as private individuals, unbaptized. All being equal, Smyth proposed that Helwys their social leader should baptize them, but he deferred to his spiritual leader.²

Smyth therefore baptized himself, then baptized Helwys and the others. The first Baptist church (ever) was born. How should they baptize? The little group was uncertain, so they improvised. The mode of baptism was trine affusion, pouring water three times on the head in the name of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Baptists would not discover immersion for over thirty years.

Controversy soon struck again. Smyth ultimately became convinced that his self-baptism (they said se-baptism) was invalid and urged the church to turn to the Dutch Mennonites for a true believer's baptism. Helwys and about ten others refused and Baptists had their first, but certainly not their last, church split. John Smyth, the founder of the Baptists, died in 1612 before he could be admitted into the Mennonite fellowship. Helwys wrote: "All our love was too little for him and not worthy of him."³

Also in 1612, Helwys led his group back to England where they founded the first Baptist church on English soil at Spitalfields, outside the city of London. This church accepted Arminian Theology and is classified as a General Baptist church because it affirmed the general or unlimited atonement. The title of Helwys' earliest treatise describes much of their theology. "A short and Plaine Prooffe, by the Word and Works of God, that Gods Decree is not the cause of anye mans sinne or condemnation and that all men are redeemed by Christ; as also that no infants are condemned." These Baptists believed that human free will and divine grace cooperated together in the salvation process, that all persons were potentially elected for salvation and those who freely accepted the terms of grace, repentance and faith, were numbered among the saints. Free will also meant that those who had received grace could later choose to reject it. Sanctification was a continued process.

The General Baptists were sometimes known as Six Principle Christians because they found their basic doctrines in the six principles of Hebrews 6:1-2 including: Repentance from dead works, faith towards God, baptism, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. In addition to baptism and the Lord's Supper, the General Baptists practiced the laying on of hands not only to

persons ordained as pastors and deacons, but also for all who received baptism. Thus at baptism, all Christians were "ordained" for ministry. It was a powerful symbol of the priesthood of all believers and the calling of all Christians to minister in Christ's name. They also observed the washing of feet as "commanded and blest by Christ," to "produce affection among the brethren." They also anointed the sick with oil as observed in James 5:14-15. Many refused to eat blood-strangled animals in obedience to Acts 15:20.

These Baptists were rabid in their call for religious freedom. Thomas Helwys' "A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity" was the first claim for absolute freedom of worship to be published in English. It called for freedom of conscience for all and asserted that kings and magistrates have no authority to judge religion. Indeed, Helwys declared, men and women may even choose to be heretics and unbelievers. For that choice they are accountable to God alone, not to earthly authorities. Thomas Helwys died in prison in 1616, not living to see his vision of freedom become a reality.

Smyth and Helwys seem rather tragic figures, don't they? Their theology took shape, but it was always in a state of flux. They were certain about some things, uncertain about others. They became convinced, certainly not all at once, of the necessity of adult believer's baptism, a doctrine they felt to be at the heart of Holy Scripture. But they did not know how to perform such an act so they improvised, and the people called Baptists were born.

Aren't the people of God always grasping the good grace of God's presence like that? Seizing an unexpected moment of conviction, hope or chance as an occasion for grace?

And isn't that what Jesus is getting at when he commissions the twelve and through them the rest of us? He calls them to announce good news of the kingdom without a contingency plan. He sends them out into the brave new world of discipleship, asking them to jettison all the things that might give them security, to make themselves vulnerable and live at the mercy of others.

"You are on your own," he says. "Go out and grow up. Heal, raise, cleanse, cast out, but do not so much as pack a bag. Don't take your charge cards or your running shoes. Don't try to anticipate every possibility. Live by faith. When the going gets tough and the grand jury indicts you, be not afraid; the Spirit speaks through you. There will be grace to improvise on the journey." He offers the

freedom of servanthood, the freedom of grace, the freedom to improvise. It was the same calling to which the early Baptists responded.

To say that we are free, free to live by grace alone, free to improvise, does not mean we fail to prepare, study or struggle. It means we can never prepare enough. All the education in the world, all the doctrines and creeds can never insure that we will not have to improvise on occasion. Sometimes life thrusts us into a situation for which we could never prepare even if we knew in advance it would happen.

They will come, those moments, in some dark night or early morning when you are all alone and called to respond to situations they never warned you about in Sunday School class. There you are in an emergency room full of imminent pain and instant chaos and there is no time to do an indepth Bible Study, no time for psychoanalysis, no time to take a poll, only time to improvise beyond text books and proof texts. And from somewhere deep as darkness you hear the word, "Fear not," and you realize that the Spirit is around there somewhere. So you speak and act, improvise and live, hoping that you will help more than you hurt.

Jesus improvised often, didn't he? There was a blind man in his path, begging for sight, so Jesus made paste of dust and spit and by grace healed him. But he did it on the Sabbath and the religious folk were scandalized. Improvising grace sometimes seems a bit irreligious. Another time the people were hungry and there was not enough at hand so Jesus borrowed loaves and fishes from a kid, said the blessing and everyone experienced quite tangibly the grace of God. And, says he, God even improvises from time to time, like when the king gives a banquet and the proper guests do not show up. So he substitutes another, more available, kind of crowd--outcasts, rejects, disabled and unwanted. "Come in," he says, "there is all this food and all this grace and I'll not let it go to waste."

And then there's Lazarus. He is dead and buried. "And if you had been here, Lord," says a grief stricken sister, "my brother would not have died." A truly divine contingency would never let this happen to any of us. But Jesus had not been there, so dare we say it, he improvises, and the Father speaks through him and once dead Lazarus comes forth from the tomb.

To improvise grace is to take a chance, to risk everything on faith. For it may not be grace at all, or the wrong kind of grace in the wrong kind of place.

Does that mean that the gospel is absolutely relative? No, it means that life, even Christian life, is absolutely unpredictable. And the wisdom to know when to

stand on unshakable convictions and when to grab for all the ambiguity you can get is what the Holy Spirit is about.

We do not simply learn to live by grace alone. Sometimes we must act when we are alone with grace. Jesus did, and so have all the saints who have laid their lives on the gospel line. The memory runs like a litany of grace improvised and imparted.

Anabaptists burned and drowned by Catholic and Protestant alike:

audacious grace in the baptism of believers.

Baptist preachers dying in English jails:

impertinent grace without a license from the state.

Rosa Parks parking herself in the wrong place on a city bus:

liberating grace for the racism of Montgomery, Alabama and the American nation.

Sometimes like those faithful we find ourselves alone with nothing but God's grace between faith and oblivion. Then, perhaps, we learn to improvise the most. Paul knew those times when he wrote audaciously: "Hard pressed on every side, we are never hemmed in; bewildered, we are never at our wit's end; hunted, we are never abandoned to our fate; struck down, we are not left to die. Wherever we go we carry death with us in our body, the death that Jesus died, that in this body also life may reveal itself, the life that Jesus lives." (2 Cor. 4:7-12, NEB)

So here we sit, earthen vessels everyone, through whom God sometimes shows forth grace for lack of a more stable constituency, no doubt. Sooner or later, like Smyth, Helwys and other of the saints, we too will have to improvise, hoping against hope that when the time comes we will find the Spirit speaking through us of grace and goodness to male or female, Palestine or Israel, secular humanist or worldly evangelical. Here we sit, waiting, hoping for grace to happen upon us.

It has happened before:

To twelve rag-tag disciples, preaching the kingdom, waiting on the Spirit;

To John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, sailing for Holland, hoping and searching for community;

To Rosa Parks, sitting on a city bus, waiting on freedom;

And, to a stone-cold Galilean, waiting in a borrowed tomb, waiting on the Father to improvise good grace.

Notes

1. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), p. 34.

2. A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: The Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 1970), p. 37.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

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