

JOHN SMYTH'S REQUEST FOR MENNONITE RECOGNITION AND ADMISSION: FOUR NEWLY TRANSLATED LETTERS, 1610-1612

Paper BWA Heritage Commission

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Introduction

As we travel back in time today to the early 1600s, we will look at the Amsterdam Waterlander Mennonites and the earliest Baptists from two perspectives. The first perspective allows us to recreate some of the circumstances under which the two groups came in contact. The second viewpoint helps us to see clearly while we zoom in on some of the details in the Mennonite correspondence regarding the English affair as the Mennonites referred to Smyth's request for recognition as a true church. Until recently, four pieces of important correspondence were known in Dutch only. Today, they are available in English translations as well.¹ *These new translations provide evidence that supports and challenges some of Coggins's views regarding the Smyth group's application to the Waterlanders and the ensuing events.*² For now, let us turn to the first perspective.

Earliest Baptists and Waterlander Mennonites

John Smyth (c. 1570-1612) was an ordained Anglican minister who turned Puritan. After the authorities fired him for being a Puritan, Smyth and his wife moved to Gainsborough where John made a living as a physician and part-time pastor. He began meeting with a Separatist church and completely broke with the Church of England in 1606.³ This Separatist church held to Calvinistic doctrine, infant baptism, and covenanted church membership. That same year, when the church became too large to go unnoticed, the leaders decided to split up into two groups in order to avoid religious persecution under King James I. The group Robinson-Brewster-Bradford met in Scrooby Manor; the Smyth-Helwys group remained in Gainsborough.⁴ Both groups fled to the Netherlands within the next two years.

When the Smyth-Helwys group arrived in Amsterdam, the city stood at the eve of becoming "perhaps the most cosmopolitan city in the world, trafficking in both goods and ideas." From Amsterdam, both the worst and the best that the Renaissance offered, was soon to spread throughout Northern Europe.⁵ Amsterdam became the most important port as the trade and traffic by the Dutch East-Indies Company flourished. In 1612, Amsterdam's population numbered 50,000. Ten years later, the population had doubled.⁶ In short, Amsterdam stood at the beginning of its Golden Age.

Amsterdam has been known for its religious tolerance. The city, however, could not practice religious tolerance during the time of the Spanish Inquisition (in Amsterdam from 1521-1578). Anabaptists were tortured, beheaded, drowned, or otherwise executed both in the capital and in other

1. For formerly known letters and translations, see Burrage, *Early English Dissenters*, vol.2, 172-218; Smyth, *Works*, vol. 2, 681-709, 733-50; and Benjamin Evans, *The Early English Baptists*, vol. 1 (London: J. Heaton & Son, 1862), 208-22. The English translations were published in article form: Kirsten T. Timmer, "John Smyth's Request for Mennonite Recognition and Admission: Four Newly Translated Letters (1610-1612)," *Baptist History and Heritage* 44, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 8-19.

2. James Robert Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck, no. 32 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 77-97.

3. Walter H. Burgess, *John Smith the Se-Baptist, Thomas Helwys and the First Baptist Church in England with Fresh Light upon the Pilgrim Fathers' Church* (London: James Clarke, 1911), 81.

4. H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 33.

5. John J. Murray, *Amsterdam in the Age of Rembrandt*, The Center of Civilization Series (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), ix.

6. *Ibid.*, 7, 10. By 1662, the population had doubled again, to 200,000.

places.⁷ Under these conditions, Menno Simons (1496-1561), “the most outstanding leader of the Anabaptist branch,” worked and ministered.⁸

The Waterlanders formed one group of Mennonites and derived their name from an area in the province of North Holland. As early as 1534, many Anabaptists lived in this district. Around 1555, the Waterlanders separated from the main Mennonite branch because they were more liberal and progressive. In 1615, the number of baptized Waterlanders in Amsterdam reached over 1,000.⁹ Compared to stricter Mennonites, the Waterlanders allowed some more contacts with the world (some of them held lower magisterial offices), marriage to non-Mennonites, and open communion. They also accepted Reformed believers into their congregation without rebaptizing them. In the Waterlander congregation, room existed for disagreement, and the elders had less authority than in other Mennonite congregations.¹⁰ Hans de Ries, minister at Alkmaar, and Lubbert Gerritsz, minister at Amsterdam, were two of the most outstanding Waterlander leaders. Smyth and Helwys came in contact with them after their arrival in Amsterdam.

When the Smyth-Helwys group fled religious persecution in England, the group settled in Amsterdam, in Jan Munter’s Bakehouse along the Amstel river, near Bakkerstraat and Engelse Pelgrimssteeg. The Bakehouse, which produced the hardtack biscuit for ships sailing to the East Indies, provided jobs for the Smyth-Helwys group as well as living quarters and a place for worship.¹¹ The Smyth-Helwys group was not the only group of English refugees in Amsterdam. Many of these refugees gathered at the English Reformed Church at the Begijnhof. Francis Johnson, leader of the Ancient Church, and John Robinson with the Scrooby group lived in Amsterdam as well. Soon, however, Robinson and his people moved to Leiden. Some of his group later returned to England and from there set sail for the New World on the Mayflower – they were the Pilgrim Fathers.

Smyth and Helwys came in contact with the Amsterdam Waterlanders through the Waterlander Jan Munter. At that time, the Waterlander congregation met at the Church at the Tower.¹² The theological discussions proved valuable: likely in 1609, Smyth adopted believer’s baptism, baptized himself and his group by effusion, and, thus, reconstituted his group as a church – the first Baptist congregation.¹³ In 1610, Smyth wrote his *Argumenta contra Baptismum Infantum*, still an important document for Baptist beliefs today. The year 1610 is where we change our perspective.

7. S. Blaupot ten Cate, *Geschiedenis der Doopsgezinden in Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht en Gelderland van derzelve Ontstaan tot op dezen Tijd, uit Oorspronkelijke Stukken en Echte Berigten Opgemaakt* (Amsterdam: P. N. van Kampen, 1847), 4-16.

8. Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1988), 255.

9. *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Waterland,” “Waterlanders.” Some derogatory nicknames for the Waterlanders were Scheedemakers (schismatics; after elder Jacob Jans Scheedemaker) and Drekwagon (garbage wagon).

10. *Ibid.*, s.v. “Waterlanders;” see also, W. J. Kühler, *Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche Doopsgezinden in de Zestiende Eeuw*, 2nd ed. (Haarlem, the Netherlands: H. D. Tjeenk Willink en Zoon, 1961), 347f.

11. *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Munter, Jan.” Jan Munter (1570-1620) owned the bakery and put the building at the disposal of the Smyth-Helwys group. After Smyth’s death, his group joined the Waterlanders in 1615. The members continued having their services there until 1639, the year their leader Thomas Pigott died and the English Waterlanders fully integrated into the Dutch Waterlander congregation. See Keith L. Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism: A History of English and Scottish Churches of the Netherlands in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Studies in the History of Christian Thought, ed. Heiko A. Oberman, vol. 31 (Leiden, the Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1982), 84: “After Pygott’s death, the English assembly in the bakery faded out as a separate body, the victim of acculturation and assimilation.”

12. *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. “Toren;” [http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/T672.html/?searchterm=De Toren](http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/T672.html/?searchterm=De%20Toren) (accessed July 28, 2009): “Toren, a former meetinghouse at Amsterdam. About 1565 the Waterlander Mennonite church of Amsterdam obtained a warehouse on the Singel Canal between Bergstraat and Torenluis close to the Jan-Rodenburgstoren (dungeon). ... In 1668, when the Waterlander congregation merged with the Lamists, both meetinghouses henceforth were used by what was then called the United Flemish and Waterlander church. In 1801, when the Zonist congregation of Amsterdam merged with this United church, the Zonist meetinghouse was closed, its pulpit and pipe organ transferred to the Toren church ... from then mostly called the “kleine” (small) church, while the Lamist church, the present Singel church, was called the “grote” (large) church.”

13. Burgess, 149, thinks it was early 1609; J. Bakker, *John Smyth, de Stichter van het Baptisme* (Wageningen: H. Veenman en Zonen, 1964), 72, argues for a date in late 1608.

Four Newly Translated Letters

Correspondence regarding the English affair, as the Mennonites referred to Smyth's request for recognition and admission, commenced with Smyth's application to the Waterlanders in February 1610.¹⁴ Helwys disagreed with Smyth's application to the Waterlanders because he did not think the principle of successionism necessary. He, then, sent a letter along with his confession of faith to the Waterlanders.¹⁵ Helwys and his small group returned to England in 1611/12 to plant the first General Baptist church on English soil. The Waterlanders considered Helwys's objections; yet they desired to grant Smyth's request.

Valuing consensus, by means of letters the Waterlanders asked other Waterlander/Mennonite congregations for their opinion on the English affair. Although these newly translated letters provide insight into the contemporary Mennonite view and practice of consensus, our main concern is with details shedding light on the English affair. As stated, these new translations provide evidence supporting as well as challenging some of Coggins's views regarding the Smyth group's application to the Waterlanders and the ensuing events.¹⁶ A discussion follows the translation of each letter. The translations retain some of the Dutch word order and punctuation to facilitate further research by non-Dutch historians.

A Letter Dated May 15, 1610

A Letter of Yeme de Ringh at Harlingen to Lubbert Gerritsz.,
Hans de Ries, and Reynier Wijbrandtsz., Dated May 15[?], 1610
To the Honorable Pious Man
Reinier Wybrants glassmaker
in Saint Luke on the
Singel in the Mennonite
Church.
At
Amsterdam

Pay the messenger¹⁷

Praise be to God XV[?] May 1610 in Harlingen

From the heart-beloved brothers and fellow servant in Christ Lubbert Ger:[ritsz.], Hans de Ries, Renier Wibrants. Your letter with the request to come there to you to discuss the English affair, has reached us; the others have been sent for immediately at my word. Our teachers, except Jacob Tiewes, have gathered and have sent their opinions regarding this to you, which you may want to review. It seems that they prefer to have first the articles which have been given to you by the English in order to review these same with the brothers so that afterwards there would come no trouble out of it since they are worried. So the friends can do what their minds think "and I do not think that even if we came there" that we perhaps would be united in the understanding and that might cause some

14. Champlin Burrage, *The Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research (1550-1641)*, vol. 2, The Dissent en Nonconformity Series, no. 10 (Cambridge: University Press, 1912; reprint, Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, n.d.), 177; and John Smyth, *The Works of John Smyth*, vol. 2, ed. W. T. Whitley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 681. Cornelius J. Dyck, "The Middelburg Confession of Hans de Ries, 1578," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36, no. 2 (April 1962): 131-32, argues for an application date of early 1610 because the English used Old Style dating. The application consisted of *Nomina Anglorum* and *Corde Credimus*.

15. See Burrage, *Early English Dissenters*, vol. 2, 182-7, for *Synopsis Fidei* and Helwys's letter to the Waterlanders.

16. James Robert Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck, no. 32 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 77-97.

17. For the Dutch text, see Burrage, *Early English Dissenters*, vol. 2, 205-7.

trouble I am afraid; but that you send to here to the teachers the articles given to you and that I do not see as evil. For I am concerned that they do not take it (so it appears) on the aspect of baptism, [that is] why I hope so that they can be satisfied with our belief and household, that it could come indeed to a good end by letters as God wills. So you think well, for I for my person had much preferred to see the case somewhat in a different manner than this, namely that they had undertaken themselves to hear and see all things/ or since they have not undertaken that they would have placed it in your hands completely. Then this as it appears has not been able to go this way/ and this so I notice from the care of the churches here. Therefore, I beg you to do so indeed and write after her desire the articles as you have given them to her and even if it were that the servant of the English co-signed/ then this would not harm my reservation, but do it as you think is good. I have co-signed this although it is not all according to my opinion/ so I cannot view it as evil, for when we do something without our congregations/ so we get certainly trouble/ for we have many hard heads to which we have to see a bit/ and it is not possible to live always in strife for our congregations grow now fairly, praise God, so that we now in two times in one month or within five weeks/ have received for baptism 40 people/ and it would not be good indeed to bring unrest among them. Further with this goes a letter which I have just received from Rippert and have opened without knowing it and have not yet read/ since I was still in bed when the letter came/ this with all my best taking away it happened unknowingly. Nothing further than be greeted from the heart along with all who are beloved to you.

Your Servant, Yeme de Rijnck

Yeme de Ringh wrote this letter some three months after the Smyth group applied for recognition as a true Mennonite congregation.¹⁸ De Ringh's letter is a reply to Gerritsz's request to Mennonite congregations that were part of the Bevredigde Broederschap to attend the May 23, 1610 conference regarding the English affair.¹⁹ De Ringh replied to Gerritsz that he had called the teachers of the Harlingen church together and discussed the issue together. Their conclusion was threefold: they should not attend the conference because they most likely could not come to a mutual understanding; they wanted to see *A Short Confession of Faith*, which de Ries and Gerritsz had drawn up and which the Smyth group had signed in agreement, so they could read Smyth's view on baptism; and they did not want to cause any unrest in their church by recognizing the Smyth group. Five other ministers of congregations in Friesland replied similarly.²⁰ In short, the Friesland teachers refused to decide upon the English affair until they had had a chance to discuss the articles of faith with their congregations and reach consensus. The teacher of the congregation at Rijnsburg, South Holland, however, expressed no concern regarding doctrinal issues in his May 18, 1610 letter.

A Letter Dated May 18, 1610

A Letter of Willem Janszoon, Teacher at Rijnsburg, to Reynier
Wybrantsz. at Amsterdam, Dated May 18, 1610

To the

Honorable and the pious reijner
Wybrant son living at Amsterdam²¹

Be greeted from the heart

18. Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists, 1603-1649* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2006), 41.

19. Bevredigde Broederschap (Satisfied Brotherhood) was the name of a group of High German, Frisian, and Waterlander Mennonites who united around 1600. In 1613, most Frisians and High Germans separated from the Broederschap due to their stricter views on the ban and mixed marriages. Also, the Amsterdam Waterlanders's consideration of accepting the Smyth group as a true Mennonite congregation contributed to the breakup. See Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation*, 81-4, and *ibid.*, "A Short Confession of Hans de Ries: Union and Separation in Early Seventeenth-Century Holland," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 60, no. 2 (April 1986): 126, 135.

20. Evans, *Early English Baptists*, vol. 1, 214.

21. For the Dutch text, see Burrage, *Early English Dissenters*, vol. 2, 207-8.

After wishes of everything good from this side I let know my dear and in-God-beloved brother and fellow worker in the gospel Reijner Wybrant's son that I have received your writing and have understood from it as that there have come some zealous hearts from England who there are seeking to unite with you and that you have spoken with them there multiple times about our household and outwardly are one with each other in confession as I understand and [you] write to us unworthy ones to come there on 23 May with some of our fellow servants to discuss with each other in order to speak on the most important [matter] with them and that I should bring some along who can understand and speak Latin, so I let my dear brother and fellow servant know that it is not convenient for me on that day since my word stands to come that day to another place which I cannot rearrange because of a reason, but I have moved Master Jacob and Cornelis van Beest to be there then with you all since they can understand and speak Latin and that you will have more help from them than from us since we do not understand that language; the Lord may give you altogether wisdom and understanding that it may take place to the honor of the gospel, to the edification of many pious and to the praise and gratitude of God's holy name and to the salvation of our dearly bought souls, for this God may loan us his grace. Amen.

Willem Ian's son from Reynsburch on 18 May [1610]

The main point of Janszoon's letter is the teacher's reply to Gerritsz's invitation. Janszoon's concern was to send two men who understood and spoke Latin. This concern supports the view that the English did not speak Dutch, nor did the Dutch speak English. The common language at the conference, then, was Latin. Not all Dutch and English, however, spoke Latin. Some men of either group, speaking both Latin and their native language, were to serve, therefore, as interpreters at the conference.²² Janszoon himself was unable to attend. He was not the only minister to decline the invitation.

A Letter Dated May 21, 1610

A Letter from Dirk Pieters at Hoorn to Lubbert Gerritsz. at
Amsterdam, Dated May 21, 1610

To the honorable Clas
Iansen Bruijn
to be passed on
to Lubbert Gerretzen in
Amsterdam

Three SS [Stuivers = nickels]
The deliverer's pay²³

God's grace for a friendly greeting. Amen.

Honorable Sir, from the heart loved and loved-in-God brother (father) and fellow servant in the Lord Lubbert Gerretsen. Since we have received the letter signed by you all of the 6th of this [May] and have thought about the same with attention (and have reviewed with worry) so we have discussed with our servants and with our fellow servants/ as well as have called for Aebell Hendericksen, Gijsbert Dircksen and Jacob Ariensen with them holding council, we find it for the best of our conscience (and for the Lord) not to come according to your desire// beg therefore hold it to us for the best/ it does not happen because you all are not worthy to us, not at all, even if it were ten more times as the Lord knows/ but [it happens] because of certain important causes which we think we have for that// As many as now deal with the case therefore we were written, is our simple advice and request that you would indeed deal carefully and thoroughly and not lightly agree to a continuation because of some dangers that may arise over that/ so that we do not hammer on the one side and break much more on the other side// for, dear brother, we see well when already a few separated nations

22. Ibid., 187.

23. For the Dutch text, see *ibid.*, 208-9.

come together how heavily it falls to keep the same in peace just as the present situation teaches us all too well// however, we know that the fruits of righteousness are sown in peace by those who keep the peace/ therefore, dearly beloved brother, let us keep that which the Lord has given us/ so that we do not lose what we have wrought but may receive full pay from the Lord/ with this may the Lord help and assist us now and in eternity. Amen. Be with this [letter] commended to the Lord and greeted from the heart with the peace of the Lord/ dated Hoorn, 21 May anno 1610.

By me Dirrick Pieterzn, your fellow servant in the Lord

Writing on his own and three other ministers' behalf, Dirk Pieters, a minister in Hoorn, North Holland, declined Gerritsz's invitation. Pieters urged the Amsterdam Waterlanders to be careful and thorough in their decision because a continuation with the English group might prove dangerous. Writing of his concern that "we do not hammer on the one side and break much more on the other side," Pieters likely was afraid of the possible breakup of the Bevredigde Broederschap. The congregations aligned with the Broederschap at that time already had difficulty maintaining peace amongst each other. Despite this difficulty, the Amsterdam Waterlanders continued working on recognition and admittance of the Smyth group which would cause more unrest in the Broederschap.

The Amsterdam Waterlanders's letter of July 16, 1610 to the Mennonite leaders in Friesland contained a request for their answers to two issues. First, the Amsterdam Waterlanders wanted to know the Frisians's opinion of the confession of faith which the Smyth group had signed. Second, they wanted to know their view of the baptism that the members of the Smyth group, in particular John Smyth, had undergone. The Amsterdam congregation, then, still desired national consensus on the English affair. Yet the congregation felt ashamed and pressured: "We are very surprised that this affair seems to have been taken at heart by you so very little, for which we are ashamed before these [English], and scarcely know what to answer that this affair is put off such a long time."²⁴

Replying two days later, the Frisian ministers urged the Amsterdam Waterlanders to acquaint "all churches in Prussia and the whole of Germany, and wherever established" with the English affair, which "is a completely new and never heard of affair."²⁵ The ministers warn against "ruin, harm, hurt, and perdition of the churches concerning the [Waterlander] peace-making or union," desiring "peace, quietness, and silence" instead. According to them, the Waterlanders's "intemperate zeal is partly the cause of" the widespread discontentment over the English alliance or union with the Mennonite congregations.²⁶ The Friesland congregations, therefore, did not want to have anything to do with the discussion. No further correspondence between the Waterlanders and the Frisian Mennonites concerning this topic has survived. Most likely, these were indeed the Frisians's last words regarding the issue. The following winter, when the Amsterdam Waterlanders brought up again the union with the English as evidenced by a surviving manuscript, Mennonite ministers were gathered around Gerritsz's deathbed. According to Coggins, by then, the Smyth group had been recognized as a true Mennonite congregation.²⁷ Coggins's threefold argument that the 1610 negotiations with the Smyth group formed a cause for the breakup of the Bevredigde Broederschap around 1613 is cogent.²⁸ His hypothesis that the May 23, 1610 conference ended negotiations and recognized the Smyth group as a true Mennonite congregation, however, is not as strong as it fails to account for two aspects as found in surviving manuscripts.

First, the Amsterdam Waterlanders' letter of July 16, 1610 requested the Friesland congregations to send their opinions on the English affair. The Waterlanders are ashamed that it is taking the Frisians such a long time, and they do not know what to answer the English regarding this

24. Evans, *Early English Baptists*, vol. 1, 215.

25. Ibid., 217. Coggins, "Short Confession," 137, argues that the Friesland ministers objected to the group's baptism because it contradicted Article 12 of the *Concept of Cologne* (an important document for the founding of the Bevredigde Broederschap). This article called for "proper succession in ordination," which rendered the Smyth group's baptism invalid since Smyth had baptized himself.

26. Evans, *Early English Baptists*, vol. 1, 217.

27. Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation*, 84. Some historians arguing that the union of 1610 failed are B. R. White, *A History of the English Baptists*, vol. 1: *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. B. R. White (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1983), 26; and W. T. Whitley, *A History of British Baptists* (London: Charles Griffin & Company, Ltd, 1923), 22.

28. Coggins, "Short Confession," 136-38.

putting off. If, as Coggins contends, the May 23 conference resulted in the recognition of the Smyth group as a Mennonite congregation, why would the Waterlanders have thought it necessary to obtain the Frisian Mennonites's opinions? The Frisians's reply of July 18, 1610 is also inconclusive regarding Coggins's hypothesis, for the leaders wrote, "We, undersigned, may not conceal from you our astonishment at your ardent and impetuous writing to us, in which you demand our answer within a fortnight, or that we afterwards shall be quiet about the alliance or union with the English, in your town, having taken place or intended."²⁹ From the remainder of the reply, the Frisian leaders seem to have believed the union had not taken place yet, since they warn against it and urge the Amsterdam Waterlanders to deliberate most seriously. The second aspect which appears to discredit Coggins's hypothesis is found in the memorandum by Claes Claeszoon Anslo.

A Memorandum Dated January 17, 1611/2

A Memorandum Made by Claes Claeszoon Anslo at Amsterdam
on Jan. 17, 1611/2
Copy³⁰

On the 17th of January when Lubbert Gerretsz was in bed very ill, he has asked all servants and also Hans de Ries/Jan Munter/Nittert Obbesz/Cornelis Albertsz/and myself Claes Claesz/ (except Mathijs Lutso[?] who was absent) even Koefoot, his desire from the heart was so he said and [we] clearly expressed to him that it was also our desire that Reijner Wijbrans might be affirmed in the full service/ since he had served the congregation for a while in the Word of God/ saying that he was at peace with that/ since he had been found being most faithful to the Word of God/ to know that the sacrament would also be well entrusted to him the best[?]/ to which we all answered yes/ and since, except for seven, it was determined peacefully by that whole congregation by silence, Lubbert Gerretsz then also asked Reynier Wybrans/ whether he was prepared to accept the heavy duty by God's grace/ who under the same also answered yes/ then Lubbert Gerretsz has placed [on] him the hand on the head/ wishing him many good wishes of God and also affirmed him and bound him to nothing but to the Word of God/ saying also that he had had great happiness that with all those men finally all concepts had been laid down and that one shall deal with everything only according to the Word of God, furthermore he has desired seriously that one, however, should not postpone the case of the English/ but complete firstly if it were possible since they had some reservations about the baptism of Mr. Smidt/ since he had no Scripture for it/ but now did want to accept all the other English without worry/ without baptizing again/ further he desired also from Nittert Obbes/ that he would lead the voting happening for this/ and would let him be placed and do his best through God's grace/ which Nittert Obbes also accepted under that same grace/ and it was also desired by Lubbert Gerretsz that Matheus[?] Iansz would do that, too, who was not present there but the servants promised to request that, too, and have all accepted Reynier Wybrans with a kiss and also have departed friendly in peace and have commended Lubbert Gerretsz with a kiss to the Lord's grace and have wished good night – and before that Lubbert Gerretsz asked Hans de Ries, since Reynier Wybrans was a young man, that he would come to his aid in everything with advice and deed/ and with him weigh all things and act as they had done together/ either orally or to write each other depending on the situation of the case/ also Lubbert Gerretsz expressed and desired/ that one in the handling of the sacraments would act in everything for the most edification of the congregation/ saying in some places at a table there around 20 people sat down/ in other places one should deal with it differently/ which might take place with the most peace/ that he had administered it at a table in De Rijk and also in other places etc.

Claes Claesz in Ansloo

This I have written on the very same day for a memorandum as soon as I came home.

Gerritsz's meeting with some Waterlander ministers resulted in affirming Wybrantsz into full service. While Mennonite consensus on local and intra-local levels takes place here in a practical way

29. Evans, *Early English Baptists*, vol. 1, 216.

30. For the Dutch text, see Burrage, *Early English Dissenters*, vol. 2, 213-15. The year is 1612 according to New Style dating.

and provides important information regarding Mennonite consensus during this time, a more intriguing passage in the letter forms the second aspect for which Coggins's hypothesis fails to account:

Saying also that he had had great happiness that with all those men finally all concepts had been laid down and that one shall deal with everything only according to the Word of God, furthermore he has desired seriously that one, however, should not postpone the case of the English/ but complete firstly if it were possible since they had some reservations about the baptism of Mr. Smidt/ since he had no Scripture for it/ but now did want to accept all the other English without worry/ without baptizing again/ further he desired also from Nittert Obbes/ that he would lead the voting happening for this.

It is not clear to whom the phrase "all those men" refers. Perhaps, it is the concluding part of Wybrantsz's ordination. If so, then "all those men" could refer to the leaders present at Gerritsz's bedside. However, the phrase may introduce the next topic, namely "the case of the English." Although the meaning of the Dutch word, translated with "postpone," is difficult to determine, the context shows that the case of the English was still pending. The main reason, Gerritsz shared, was the reservation of the ministers regarding Smyth's se-baptism which had no biblical warrant. Gerritsz understood the reservations, yet encouraged the leaders to accept all the other English without rebaptizing them. The aspect of consensus played an important role since Gerritsz asked Obbes to lead the vote on accepting the other English.

From this discussion, two observations are noteworthy. First, John Smyth was still alive at this time. If he had died already, then the Mennonite ministers would have had no reasons for their reservations. According to Burrage's description, Smyth was still alive indeed: "Smyth had long been of consumptive tendency, and in the summer of 1612 he grew rapidly weaker and died at the end of August in that year."³¹ Second, a complete acceptance of the Smyth group as a true congregation does not seem to have taken place before January 17, 1612. If acceptance had been arrived at during the May 23, 1610 conference, then why did Gerritsz urge his fellow ministers to accept all the other English in January 1612? The available evidence, then, shows that most likely the May 23 conference did not finalize the discussion.³² Wright, however, proposes an intermediate position which is well-argued and is partly based on Helwys's chiding of the Waterlanders:

The Waterlanders could not admit Smyth and his friends formally, but offered them tacit recognition as a group, and close informal association, through continued accommodation at Munter's bakehouse. Helwys chided the Waterlanders. . . . [The group] found [itself] in ecclesial limbo, unable to go forward or back, the only means to properly church themselves blocked by the Broederschap.³³

Conclusion

Baptist historians need more evidence to prove their hypotheses conclusively. As it stands today, the letters of July 16 and July 18, 1610 as well as the memorandum of January 17, 1612 contain phrases indicating the May 23, 1610 conference did not have the result for which the Amsterdam Waterlanders and Smyth had hoped. Close association between the two groups continued since the Smyth group lived at Jan Munter's bakehouse.³⁴ Nothing else is known with regard to this

31. Champlin Burrage, *The Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research (1550-1641)*, vol. 1, The Dissent en Nonconformity Series, no. 9 (Cambridge: University Press, 1912; reprint, Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, n.d.), 248. The burial books of the Nieuwe Kerk show an entry for John Smyth's burial and the fee paid. Smyth died September 1, 1612; the fee was paid the following Sunday, September 9, 1612.

32. Jason Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth. Puritan, Separatist, Baptist, Mennonite* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 95, n269; and Burrage, *Early English Dissenters*, vol. 1, 249. Likely without having a complete English translation available, both authors correctly refer to the memorandum of January 17, 1612.

33. Wright, *Early English Baptists*, 42-3. For Helwys' comments, see Thomas Helwys, *An Advertisement or Admonition unto the Congregations ... New Fryesers* (Amsterdam?, 1611), 39-40.

34. Sprunger, 83; Wright, *Early English Baptists*, 42-3; and Evans, *Early English Baptists*, vol. 1, 220.

group before their request of November 6, 1614 to merge with the Amsterdam Waterlanders.³⁵ Until then, the other Mennonite congregations likely continued stalling negotiations. Finally, in January 1615, the Smyth group was “admitted in the community ... *without baptism*.”³⁶

Finally, the union of the Smyth group with the Waterlanders was a fact. Yet it had come at great cost. The Waterlanders in Holland had alienated themselves from the Mennonite leaders in Friesland and Germany. Plausibly, this alienation contributed to the breakup of the Bevredigde Broederschap in 1613.

35. Evans, *Early English Baptists*, vol. 1, 220.

36. *Ibid.*, 221.

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Correspondence regarding the English affair, as the Mennonites referred to Smyth's request for recognition and admission, commenced with his application to the Waterlanders in February 1610. (2) Until recently, historians have translated only a selection of the known correspondence from the Dutch and Latin into the English language. (3) Today, English translations of four more letters concerning the English affair are available. (4) Although these communications provide helpful insight into the Mennonite view and practice of consensus, this article mainly focuses on details shedding light John Smyth (Smith) was born in East England. He studied theology at the University of Cambridge in 1586-1593, and probably also medicine, and became a minister in the Church of England at Lincoln. In 1602, after nine months of doubt and deliberation, he left the state church. About this time or shortly before he was won to the principles of the Puritan Brownists, whom he had previously attacked in a polemical tract. After leaving the state church he seems to have traveled and preached for some months