

PORTRAITS OF COURAGE



STORIES OF
BAPTIST HEROES



Julie Whidden Long

JOHN SMYTH BAPTIST TRAILBLAZER



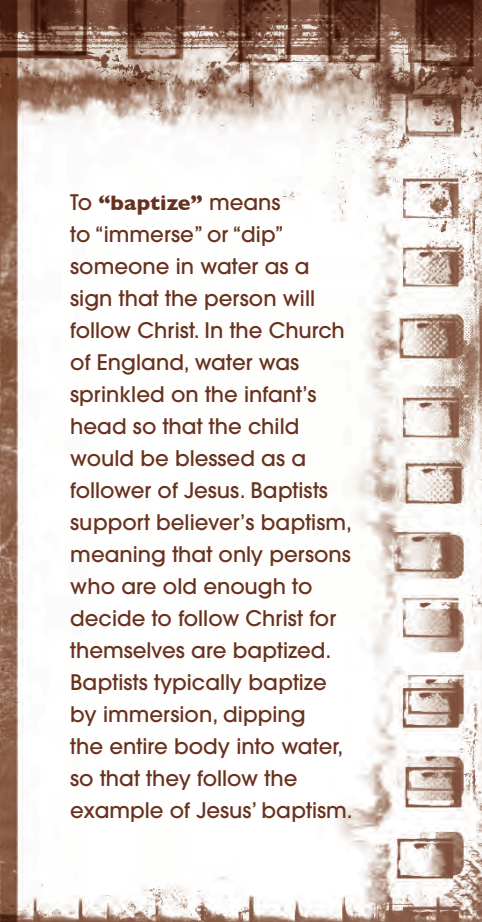
Who: John Smyth

Where: England and Holland

When: c. 1570-1612

What he did: Led a group of people who formed the first Baptist church in the world

Most historians consider John Smyth to be the first Baptist. He was a Baptist trailblazer, forging a new way, but John's own beginnings are a mystery. He was born around 1570 in England. No one knows the date or place of his birth or anything about his family. In fact, not much is known of John at all, until he attended Christ's College at Cambridge in 1586. At Cambridge, he studied to become a priest in the Church of England. While he was intelligent and able, his teachers and classmates thought he had "an unsettled head," always thinking about new ideas and never settling on what he believed.



To “**baptize**” means to “immerse” or “dip” someone in water as a sign that the person will follow Christ. In the Church of England, water was sprinkled on the infant’s head so that the child would be blessed as a follower of Jesus. Baptists support believer’s baptism, meaning that only persons who are old enough to decide to follow Christ for themselves are baptized. Baptists typically baptize by immersion, dipping the entire body into water, so that they follow the example of Jesus’ baptism.

At that time, the Church of England was the official church for the country. The country required all citizens to be members of the Church of England. They had their babies **baptized** in the church, attended the church worship services, gave their money to the Church of England, and accepted the Church’s beliefs. Those people who refused to do so were punished by fines, whippings, and jail time.

As John asked questions about God, the Bible, and the church, he began

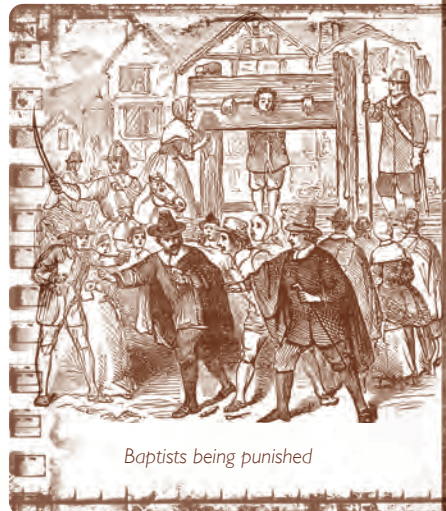
to believe that the Church of England was not the “true church.” He became a Separatist, part of a group that decided to “separate” from the Church of England. John spoke out against the church’s teachings and practices so loudly and critically that he was punished by spending time in an English prison.

In 1600, a church in the city of Lincoln asked John to be their pastor. He got himself in trouble by preaching sermons that criticized some of the town’s leading citizens.

The people of the church wanted to reform the Church of England. They did not want to separate from the church completely, as John did. They rejected John's beliefs, and he was asked to leave the church. Little is known about his life for the next three years.

In 1606, John founded a church that accepted his beliefs more readily. He became pastor of a church in Gainsborough. He also served the town as a doctor. In Gainsborough, John taught that only the members of the congregation should give money to support their church. No money was accepted from nonmembers, which was a change from how the Church of England operated!

By 1607, John's congregation was growing, and they were afraid of being discovered and persecuted by the Church of England. They did not want to give up their beliefs, and they did not want to be punished for their practices. They left England and fled to Amsterdam, Holland, a safe place for people who did not agree with the Church of England. John was a leader of the group, along with a man named Thomas Helwys, who funded the trip. The group settled in Holland





and began to worship and study the Bible together.

As John studied the New Testament, his ideas continued to grow and change. He prepared a writing in 1609 that expressed his new views. *The Character of the Beast, or the False Constitution of the Church* described some views that later became known as Baptist ideas.

The first of John's ideas concerned baptism. He believed that infants should not be baptized. Why? Because he thought that the scriptures taught that that only those who could make a choice to be believers for themselves should be baptized. No infants were baptized in the New Testament. John pointed out that Jesus told his followers to make disciples before baptizing them. John decided to start a new church made up of believers who were baptized by their own choice.

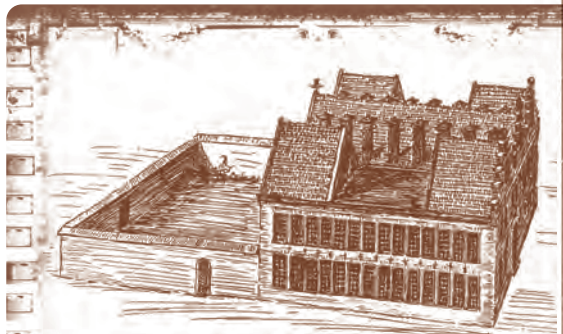
So, John and his congregation started a new church. Because no church existed that he believed to be a true church, he first baptized himself and then baptized about forty others. Although some people criticized John for baptizing himself, the first Baptist church in the world began with his self-baptism.

John had long struggled with the idea of the "true church." He rejected the Church of England, and he had

not yet found another church that seemed to follow the teachings of the New Testament. His Bible study led John to believe that the church should be made up of baptized believers only, people who chose to be a part of the church. He also thought that every local congregation of believers should have the right to make its own decisions and determine its mission.

John also spoke out for religious freedom. Obviously, religious freedom was important to his congregation, as they fled England because of religious persecution. John wrote that the government should not interfere with the church or with a person's religious beliefs. He also thought that worship should be free and "inspired by the heart," not forced. John and his small group of Baptists influenced England and America to be open to the religious views of all their citizens.

John's leadership for this first Baptist church was creative. Not only did the church members develop new beliefs and practices, but they found creative ways to support themselves. John worked as a medical doctor in the village. Members of the congrega-



*Building in which Baptists worshipped
and baked biscuits*

tion made a living by baking biscuits to sell to those on ships in the harbor. The first Baptists worshipped together and shared the message of Christ and their church with those in their community.

When John and his congregation had left England in 1607, they were not Baptist. They simply sought religious freedom. But as they continued learning and practicing what they read in the Bible, new beliefs and practices came about: believer's baptism, church freedom, and religious freedom. These ideas have shaped Baptists for four hundred years. John Smyth and his first Baptist followers painted a new portrait of following Jesus and of being church together.

Just as his beliefs changed earlier in his life, John's beliefs continued to change after he became Baptist. He later decided that the Mennonite Church was the "true church," and he tried to join their membership. He died in August 1612 before he was accepted by the Mennonites, without membership in any church.

John Smyth, considered the first Baptist, was neither a Baptist at the beginning of his life nor a Baptist at the end of his life. During the short period of time that Baptists can claim him, however, he was a Baptist hero! He helped to form the Baptist tradition, a tradition that has grown and developed into a large group of faithful Christians. He has been called a Baptist "pathfinder" and a Baptist "trailblazer," because he led his congregation to find their own way and to blaze a trail on which many more Baptists would follow.

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Written by Julie Whidden Long, this 128-page book, designed especially for younger youth and older children, presents the stories of Baptist heroes. These heroes lived in various countries and centuries and represent many phases of Baptist life. By highlighting the biographical dimension of the Baptist past, these inspiring stories help readers appreciate the personal contributions of heroic Baptist men and women.



Rev. Julie Whidden Long is the pastor of First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Georgia. She previously served as minister of children and families (2005–2013) and associate pastor (2013–2018) at FBCX Macon. Additionally, Rev. Long was the associate director of Baptist Women in Ministry (2018–2019) and launched a coaching and consulting practice in 2020. A native of Fitzgerald, Georgia, she is a two-time graduate of Mercer University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Christianity and History from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2002 and a Master of Divinity from McAfee School of Theology in 2005. She is married to Jody Long, executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia, and they have two children.