

TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

THE ROLE OF JOHN ROBINSON IN THE
FORMATION OF CONGREGATIONALISM

HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY II

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In April of 1626 the little struggling community of Pilgrims huddled in the challenging Plymouth countryside received a letter from their home town of Leydens in Holland that did more to threaten their morale and stamina than anything nature had thrown at them. Their beloved pastor, the Rev. John Robinson had died!

In a letter dated March of 1671 a Mr. Woodbridge wrote a Mr. Baxter explaining the Ecclesiastical state of the Churches in New England. He said,

of Plymouth jurisdiction I question not but God knows many sincere hearts and faithful hearts among them. Yet they seem to be oversprinkled with Brownism, and to be woven with some of the finer and more spiritual threads of Anabaptism. The first members of the church of Plymouth, the head town from which the whole colony is denominated, were a swarm of Mr. Robinson's Church in Holland.¹

James Heron, in his book, A Short History of Puritanism, says much the same thing about John Robinson that other writers of Puritan and New England history have written. He says John Robinson is the most lustrous name in the history of Congregationalism; and its true father, a man of great breadth of mind and elevation of spirit. It was his congregation at Leyden that was the mother church of the Pilgrim Fathers.²

John Robinson is called the Pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers by many historians. When one studies either Puritanism or Congregationalism there are continual references to Rev. John Robinson. Exactly what role did John Robinson play in the formation of Congregationalism? This is the question we hope to answer.

When the historical records are consulted we must draw the conclusion that John Robinson did not make any significant contribution to either the theology or polity of Congregationalism. The Puritan and Separatist movements both pre-date Robinson and seem to influence Robinson himself. He went to Cambridge where he came under

the definite influence of Puritanism. He was a disciple of such men as Chaderton, Hildersam, Dod, and Perkins, men known for their Puritan beliefs. This basic dissatisfaction with the Church of England found fertile soil in his pastorate at St. Andrews in Norwich.

If Robinson already felt scruples about church-order which inclined him to welcome a sphere of comparative liberty, he found it at St. Andrew's. His church had always had the privilege of choosing its own vicar, probably a Puritan. There was already a Brownist congregation in Norwich. Norwich, indeed, was then, and had long been, a hot bed of separatistic tendencies.³

In 1606 or 1607 Robinson linked himself with the separatistic church at Scrooby. The church was already headed by Rev. Clifton, its pastor, and Brewster, its elder. The three of them seemed to enjoy a free styled ministry.

One gets the impression that Clifton, Brewster, and Robinson apportioned the preaching and pastoral work informally among themselves; and that there was no attempt at official organization in the Scrooby Church.⁴

Besides being influenced by the Puritans and Separatists, Robinson was also influenced by a group called the Independents. One of the major spokesmen of this group, Rev. Jacob, influenced Robinson profoundly. The old theory was that Robinson influenced Jacob toward the Independent view but most modern scholars agree that it was Jacob who convinced Robinson. Henry Jacob was non-separatist.

He was already such when he held conference with Robinson at Leydens, about 1612, and had been such since 1605; and, instead of being converted to separatism by Robinson, as is said by the traditional story, he made a convert of Robinson.⁵

Brownists, Puritan, Separatist, and Independent ideas of church polity were the foundation stones of Congregationalism and were already playing havoc with the Church of England by the time Robinson comes on the scene. In essence, he was converted to Con-

gregationalism in its early, formative years.

His conversion to congregational principles was gradual, and the result of patient inquiry.⁶

Robinson started out holding many of the Brownists and Separatists views. These movements were both more reactionary than the Independent movement. In 1610

"Robinson was not an Independent but a separatist."⁷

From these stronger anti-Church of England groups Robinson moved slowly into the Independent camp thanks to Rev. Jacob.

The continental life of Robinson can best be studied in connection with that of Henry Jacob and William Bradshaw...We know that already in 1605 Jacob had well-defined Independent, or Congregational, Puritan (non-separatist) views as to church polity.⁸

Robinson's basic agreement with the basic views of the Independent or Congregational movement can be illustrated by an analysis of his views on creeds, local church autonomy, and covenant theology.

The emphasis on less church structure in this new movement reflected itself in the drift away from using creeds as a basis of unity. Robinson encouraged this tendency in his churches.

He stressed unity in the Christian walk of life rather than conformity in doctrine.⁹

Robinson saw the need for each Christian to interpret the Bible himself and not to have his beliefs imposed on him from a creed. The basis of unity was to be Christian conduct, the Christian walk of life.

Robinson did not emphasize creedal agreement in the church. In fact, he was inclined to minimize it in the light of his emphasis upon Christian conduct. Doctrine, according to him, could easily be a hindrance to Christian development.¹⁰

Perhaps we can see a small influence by Robinson in this anti-creedal, anti-historical view simply by the fact that he seemed to

carry it further than previous men did. His last statement to the departing Pilgrims certainly went further than previous men had stated it. Robinson said,

Brethren, we are now quickly to part from one another, and whether I may ever live to see your face on earth any more, the God of heaven only knows; but whether the Lord has appointed that or no, I charge you, before God and his blessed angels, that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow the Lord Jesus Christ. If God reveal anything to you by any other instrument of his, be as ready to receive it as ever you receive by his ministry.¹¹

Robinson said that unlike the followers of Calvin and Luther, they must be willing to go beyond any previous views held by men if the scripture so demands it. No theology is too sacred!

Robinson also agreed with, and propagated the idea of the autonomy of the local church. The basic governing body of the church must be the local congregation itself. Robinson says,

The elder in ruling and governing the church must represent the people, and occupy their place. It should seem, then, that it appertains unto the people, unto the people primarily and originally under Christ, to rule and govern the church, that is themselves.¹²

This autonomy of the local church is vividly shown in the procedures for excommunicating church members.

The church excommunicating must be that particular congregation gathered together in the name of Christ, whereof the sinner is a member...one man cannot be a church.¹³

Again, Robinson seems to be voicing in an effective way the basic view of the new independent movement soon to be known as Congregationalism.

The concept of the covenant as a basis of church unity was already prevalent when Robinson started the active part of his ministry, in fact he probably had to take such a covenant when he joined the church at Scrooby. Again, Robinson acted as one of the most able

disseminators of this idea. He states,

A company of faithful people thus covenanting together are a church, though they be without any officers among them.¹⁴

The ideas may not have been original with Robinson but because of the success of his ministry and the large and influential audience he had, his efforts played a major role in establishing a place for Congregationalism. Even if one cannot call him a founder of Congregationalism, one certainly must consider him one of its ablest proponents.

As an influential pastor, Robinson not only was able to cement permanently into Congregationalism its unique views of polity and theology, he was also able to help transform the old reactionary, anti-state church feeling of the movement into a positive and aggressive view.

In church polity he strenuously maintained the independence of the local church and its divine authority as opposed to the established church. But he was more broadminded and tolerant than most of the other Separatist leaders.¹⁵

Robinson had been the target of intolerance himself and saw the poisoning effect it had on the Church of Christ. In his last sermon to the departing Pilgrims he

urged a hearty co-operation with the non-conforming ministers of the Church of England, whose bishops had driven him and his from their country.¹⁶

In this same sermon he also advised them to drop the name "Brownist," a nickname that had very negative connotations. Their church must now become a positive movement and not simply a reaction against someone else. Robinson felt they could only dispose of the title of being reactionary if they could successfully turn around and admit that other groups, including the Church of England, were also

part of the universal Church of Christ.

Not only did Robinson help change the focus of Congregationalism from being reactionary to being a positive movement, he also gave it new vitality with which to do it. When Robinson comes onto the scene the picture of Congregationalism looks very bleak indeed.

When James I came to the English Throne, the attempt to restore the congregational polity seemed to have ended in hopeless defeat; and the fortunes of those principles for which Barrowe and Greenwood had suffered martyrdom appeared to depend on the fidelity of the exiles in Amsterdam. But in 1602 Congregationalism had reappeared in a district in the north of England on the borders of Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, and Yorkshire.¹⁷

The number of congregational fellowships was very limited indeed and because of pressure from different fronts it stood a good chance of becoming an extinct ecclesiastical bird. Into this picture comes the able and talented Rev. Robinson. Two years after the church was formed at Gainsborough

it received a great accession of strength. John Robinson... united himself to the church at Gainsborough.¹⁸

This church divided because of size and formed a new church at Scrooby. Robinson ministered at Scrooby until it became evident that the tensions caused by intolerance and persecution were becoming too much. The church moved to Amsterdam, about 100 of the congregation and their pastor, Rev. Robinson.

He was the trusted leader of a little band of Separatists who were assailed from many sides, and he felt it to be his duty to go forth again and again into the field as their champion. They had no occasion ever to be ashamed of their leader.¹⁹

One of the first dangers Rev. Robinson faced at Amsterdam was within the separatist church with which they hoped to join. The pastor of the Amsterdam church, Rev. Johnson, had moved away from a purely congregational position. Within his church he developed an

authoritative eldership. The congregation had no ruling power except to nominate who they wanted to rule over them.

Robinson and his friends, on the other hand, denied that the elders are in any sense the church; and he expressly repudiated the theory that since the elders represent the church, the acts of the eldership are the acts of the church.²⁰

In the spring of 1609 Robinson and his band moved on to Leyden. Here they were able to worship and develop their church in a true Congregational way.

The Scrooby exiles did wisely in determining to remove themselves beyond the reach of the exciting and distracting influences which were agitating the church in Amsterdam, and they found in Leyden a quiet home.²¹

In this ideal and isolated setting Rev. Robinson was able to disciple his church. During their years at Leyden they not only grew in the depth of their Christian commitment but they also grew numerically, increasing to over 300 members by 1620. Rev. Robinson was described as

a man of learned, polished and modest spirit, pious and studious of the truth, largely accomplished, with suitable gifts and qualifications.²²

Professor Hornbeek who was a teacher at the University of Leyden at this time said of the pastor,

John Robinson was most dear to us while he lived, was on familiar terms with the Leyden theologians, and was greatly esteemed by them.²³

It seems Rev. Robinson had a real gift of being able to take the Bible, Christian doctrine, and Congregational polity and weave it intricately into the fabric of that church at Leyden in an exciting and positive way that left a permanent impression on Congregationalism. One of the members of that congregation, writing on the Mayflower, said of the church at Leyden,

I persuade myself never people upon earth lived more lovingly together and parted more sweetly than we the Church at Leyden did; parting not rashly in a distracted humour, but upon joint and serious deliberation, often seeking the mind of God by fasting and prayer.²⁴

Governor William Bradford, leader of the Pilgrims says in his history that

it was hard to judge whether he delighted more in having such a people, or they in having such a pastor.²⁵

When one steps back and takes a broad historical look at the Pilgrims from the time of their persecution in England, through their experience in Leyden and then their final test on American soil, it becomes obvious that they were guided through it all by God's help and the able leadership of Robinson. Certainly they could never have had the spiritual depth and stamina to endure the hardships of the trip and settlement in America without the encouragement, comfort, and spiritual growth that Robinson ministered to them at Leyden. His gifts as spiritual father certainly had a major role in keeping Congregationalism alive during those early formative years.

However, we must not limit Robinson's "father role" to that of spiritual father. During the congregation's various moves and resettlements Robinson proved to be a valuable adviser on common everyday problems and civil difficulties. Governor Bradford says,

he was also very able to give them direction in civil affairs, and to foresee dangers and inconveniences; by which means he was very helpful to their outward estates.²⁶

Both the spiritual and physical well-being of that church seemed to be the result of Robinson's able ministry.

Of course one of the main contributions of the early Congregationalists was the spiritual and moral guidance they contributed in the early years of the United States. It was in the United States

that Congregationalism would come into its own and have its most influential ministry and yet this might not have happened at all if it had not been for the personal effort of Rev. Robinson.

The Leyden congregation felt like exiles in Holland even though they enjoyed a considerable degree of freedom. They really did miss their fellowship with England and wanted to keep their English ways. They also saw the possibility of increased persecution, even from England. Neither were they particularly impressed, it seems, with having their children grow up under the influence of Dutch culture and language. There also seems to have been a desire to spread the gospel to new lands. If this latter idea was really a reason for moving elsewhere or whether it was simply a rationalization no one can know for sure. Robinson and Elder Brewster, in particular, were getting anxious.

Robinson and Brewster have been anxiously looking at their condition and feel that they are not accomplishing their best usefulness. They lay their views before various brethren, proposing another removal... (Some had fears) but Robinson and his friends answered by frankly admitting the difficulties, and asserting the need of a corresponding courage... The discussion was long and anxious. At length the leaders prevail, and a majority vote decides the question. They will go.²⁷

As their spiritual father Robinson encouraged them and inspired them to see this as God's will. It wasn't long before the congregation caught the spirit of the thing.

Again, Robinson was called upon to do more than guide spiritually. Much paper work and red tape had to be dealt with before a part of their congregation could make the voyage. Because they wanted to go to the new world under the auspices of England the problem was even greater.

In order to settle in America they needed a charter. Realizing that they were in disfavor Robinson and his people drew up the Seven Articles of 1617...The above statement and the Mayflower compact are the only official declarations of the Pilgrim Fathers which have come down to us.²⁸

With a lot of planning and work part of the Leyden congregation was finally ready to make the voyage, but

the final determination was not reached till they had held a solemn meeting and a day of humiliation to seek the Lord for his direction. After a sermon from the beloved Robinson, in which he 'strengthened them against their fear and encouraged them in their resolutions,' the plans were matured and adopted.²⁹

With the combined spiritual and practical help of Robinson, the congregation was on their way on the Mayflower.

Robinson's influence on the Pilgrim Fathers did not grow less with the increase in miles between himself and his congregation. The Pilgrims' attachment, love and respect for their pastor was a continued source of strength and hope during those early difficult years of settlement at Plymouth. Robinson kept in touch with his people through letters in which he exhorted his people.

Robinson supplied the Pilgrims with a literature from his own pen, admirably adapted to their circumstances.³⁰

The Pilgrims continued hoping and looking forward to the time when Robinson could join them in the New World as their minister. This desire was so strong and intense that it almost seems like a type of messianic hope. Because of their dedication to him they did not appoint a new pastor for many years in the New World.

The Pilgrim Church had no pastor dwelling among them, though William Brewster had regularly conducted services, preaching and teaching as their ruling elder. They constantly hoped for the coming of their pastor, John Robinson.³¹

This hope for the coming of Robinson, a hope that had kept them going through the most difficult trials, was finally crushed

when the shocking news reached them in 1626 that their pastor was dead.

In all the troubled career of the saints nothing ever quite so stunned them. Their darkest hours had been lighted by the hope that their beloved pastor would soon join them and they might again sit at his feet and be comforted as they had been with such content at Leyden. His eloquent letters with their serene faith, their clear-eyed grasp of fundamentals, their warm quick sympathy and understanding, had given them heart to go on when they were on the brink of despair.³²

It would be difficult to find a unique contribution that John Robinson made to Congregational polity. Yet, his contribution to Congregationalism is very impressive. He took the basic views of Congregationalism and focused and sharpened them for a particular congregation of believers. He took the skeletal outline of congregational polity and robed it with the flesh of a living congregation more successfully than any other pastor of his time. Others may have thought of the ideas and views of Congregationalism, but John Robinson put those ideas into action. He guarded, cultivated, and groomed his little congregation until they became the powerful and potent seed that was necessary to start a new nation and guide it in its early years. The credit for the conception of congregationalism may go to other men, but its growth is certainly due to the pastorship of Rev. John Robinson. He is often called the Pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers and perhaps this title best describes his contribution to Congregationalism.

FOOTNOTES

¹ John Waddington, Congregational History. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1874), p. 666.

² James Heron, A Short History of Puritanism. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908), p. 42.

³ F.J. Powicke, John Robinson. (London: Hodder and Stoughton,) p. 8.

⁴ Powicke, John Robinson, p. 20.

⁵ Ibid., p. 93.

⁶ Waddington, Congregational History, p. 160.

⁷ Champlin Burrage, The Early English Dissenters. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), p. 291.

⁸ Ibid., p. 290.

⁹ Peter Y. DeYong, The Covenant Idea in New England Theology. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1945), p. 81

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 82.

¹¹ W.H. Stowell and D. Wilson Scot, The Puritans In England. (London: T. Nelson, Paternoster Row, 1851), p. 358.

¹² R.W. Dale, History of English Congregationalism. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), p. 202.

¹³ Robert Ashton, The Works of John Robinson, 3 vols. (Boston: Boston Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1851), 3:434, 435

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 132

¹⁵ Albert Dunning, Congregationalists In America, (New York: J.A. Hill & Co., 1894), p. 78.

¹⁶ Massachusetts Sabbath School, The Path of The Pilgrim Church, (Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, 1862), p. 152.

¹⁷ Dale, History of English Congregationalism, p. 191.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 194.

¹⁹ John Brown, Pilgrim Fathers of New England and Their Puritan Successors, (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1895), p. 137.

²⁰ Dale, History of English Congregationalism, p. 202.

²¹ Ibid., p. 203.

²² Dunning, Congregationalists In America, p. 73.

²³Ibid., p.78

²⁴Brown, Pilgrim Fathers of New England and Their Puritan Successors, p. 131.

²⁵Dunning, Congregationalists In America, p. 25.

²⁶Brown, Pilgrim Fathers of New England and Their Puritan Successors, p. 196.

²⁷Massachusetts Sabbath School, The Path of The Pilgrim Church, pp.123-128.

²⁸DeYong, The Covenant Idea In New England Theology, p. 72

²⁹Massachusetts Sabbath School, The Path of The Puritan Church,

³⁰Waddington, Congregational History, p. 196.

³¹Dunning, Congregationalists In America, p. 98.

³²George F. Willison, Saints and Strangers, (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1945), pp.258,259.

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