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JOHN ROBINSON:
THE MAN THEY WOULD NOT LET US FORGET

BY

KATHLEEN C. BELIVEAU
MA Degree, University of New Hampshire, 2009

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

History

December, 2009

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Date

To My Extraordinary Husband, Dean

*We'll never comprehend all the great things he does; his miracle-surprises can't be counted. Somehow, though he moves right in front of me, I don't see him; quietly but surely he's active, and I miss it.
(Job 9:1)*

To my Remarkable Daughter, Olivia

*Thank God! Call out his Name! Tell the whole world who he is and what he's done! Sing to him! Play songs for him! Broadcast all his wonders! Revel in his holy Name, God-seekers, be jubilant! Study God and his strength, seek his presence day and night; Remember all the wonders he performed, the miracles and judgments that came out of his mouth.
(1 Chronicles 16:8)*

*I hope you never lose your sense of wonder
And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance
I hope you dance!
(Sanders, Sillers)*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I think most writers acknowledge that their success is dependent upon those who “keep the home fires burning.” However, no one recognizes that more than I.

First, this work never would have seen the light of day were it not for the incredible patience of my advisor, mentor, and unfailing cheerleader, Dr. Eliga Gould. To you I offer you my sincere thanks and deepest appreciation. There were times when I thought I would never finish. I am sure you must have wondered yourself. Nonetheless, you always expressed the utmost confidence that I would not fail. If you had doubted me, I don’t know that I could have gone on. Thank you.

Second, my appreciation also goes out to my other readers, Dr. Cynthia Van Zandt and Dr. Marc Schwarz. Thank you for giving of your time and effort to read, offer insights, and approve this work of my heart.

Third, my friends and church stood by me, encouraging me to do what needed to be done. To you I offer my thanks. Some of you also gave of your time to watch my daughter. They are too many of you to list here, but a few who carried the brunt of the time were my neighbors, Mark and Kim Fredette, my friends, Polly Kopituk and Alanna Klekar, my in-laws, Bob and Lucille Beliveau, and my parents, Bob and Gloria France

who never gave up hope that I would eventually finish. I have completed this degree because of your support and prayers.

I also want to thank the wonderful people I met along the way who proved to be of great assistance. They include the reference staff at the University of New Hampshire, Jeffrey Waller at St. Anselm's College, Peggy Baker of the Pilgrim Museum in Plymouth, Dr. Jeremy Dupertuis Bangs of the Pilgrim Museum in Leiden, Holland, and Dr. Keith Sprunger, Professor Emeritus of History at Bethel College.

To my daughter Olivia who willingly gave of her time to let her mommy work, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I am so proud of you and of all you have accomplished in your brief years. I appreciate the love and joy you offer me and those around you by just being you!

At last I come to my husband Dean who supported me throughout this endeavor. Even when he thought it would never end, he sacrificed of his time and resources. My love and appreciation is yours forever. I know I would not have accomplished nearly as much as I have without your strong, unfailing support. Thank you!

Ultimately, both my husband and my daughter saw to it that I had everything I needed to write the story of this incredible man, John Robinson. For that alone, they are themselves, incredible.

FOREWARD

John Robinson was an amazing man. Not only did he possess the admiration of his foes, but he endeared himself to a small colony of Separatists to the extent that even when divided by thousands of miles, they sought his opinion and adhered to his counsel. This man lived his life in relative obscurity yet was able to significantly influence a small band of Separatists who eventually influenced a continent. To this day, people travel from all over the world to see the spot where a small group of Pilgrims landed and forged a new colony that founded a nation. But who was this man, John Robinson, whom this small group admired; this man from nowhere who died at a young age yet demanded such respect from both friend and foe?

If I could meet John Robinson, I would ask what his childhood was like and how he made his decision to become a Separatist. How did he attain such visionary discretion? Was the love he had for his congregation something he naturally possessed or was it something he sought? What accounts for the difference between his unified congregation and Francis Johnson's divisive, gossip riddled church? Why was his view of the Bible different than that of Richard Bernard? Why did he think his congregates

could learn from others – and not feel threatened himself? Most of all, I would ask how he carried such influence over thousands of miles of ocean and over the ensuing years?

At first, I possessed a simple interest in John Robinson. Who was this man? However, as I studied and wrote, I found that interest growing into more and more of a fascination. Now, that I am at the end, my interest and fascination have developed into an enthusiasm - not only for his ministry, not only for the tremendous impact he exercised over that small group of determined, passionate men and women - but for him as an individual. Who was he? Where did he come from? Did he have a clue as to where he was headed? It seems that I can never find out enough. Whoever he was, he most certainly was a man of an uncommon spirit.

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ABSTRACT

by

Kathleen C. Beliveau
University of New Hampshire, December, 2009

"Robinson has been seldom read and only inadequately studied."¹
Timothy George

Very little is known of John Robinson. This paper endeavors to partially remedy this problem. In order to attempt such a significant project a variety of works were consulted.

While there is very little information about Robinson's first eighteen years, we can piece together insight from the times in which he lived. Further clues come from his own writings while the reminiscences of those who knew him offer additional insight.

Secondary writings include authors such as the late O.S. Davis, William Wallace Fenn, and Perry Miller. Contemporary authors encompass Stephen Brachlow, Timothy George, and Keith Sprunger. A few pictures have been added to help the reader grasp the times and places of this story.

¹ Timothy George, *John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2005), vii.

While present-day scholars are unable to offer a detailed word description of who John Robinson was, there is enough information to sketch a penciled likeness, as it were, of this remarkable man.

December, 2009

CHAPTER ONE –

JOHN ROBINSON: HIS LIFE AND HIS TIMES

The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life.¹
Plato, *The Republic*

The twenty-first century is indeed a hectic, generally impersonal age that, at the same time connects more people around the globe than at any other time in history. Social isolation is increasing as people spend more and more time watching television and "surfing" the internet.² Travel is commonplace³, moving is frequent⁴, and families are in turmoil.

¹ Plato, *Republic*, ed. Elizabeth Watson Scharffenberger, trans. Benjamin Jowett, (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004), 122.

² "Of regular Internet users who use the net five or more hours per week, about one quarter indicated they spend less time with family and friends, either in person or on the phone . . ." Kathleen O'Toole, "Study Offers Early Look at How Internet is Changing Daily Life"; available from [http://www.stanford.edu/group/siass/Press Release/press release.html](http://www.stanford.edu/group/siass/Press%20Release/press%20release.html). In 2002 in the United States alone 79% of the population had current Internet access. These statistics encompass only those sixteen years of age and older. Nielsen Media Research, "Global Internet Population Grows an Average of Four Percent Year-Over-Year"; available from http://www.nielsen-online.com/pr/pr_030220_hk.pdf

³ The U.S. Customs and Border Protection reported clearing 86 million air travelers visiting the U.S. in 2005. This was the highest recorded number. CBP Headquarters, "The United States Welcomes Highest Number of Travelers in History"; available from http://www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/newsroom/news_releases/archives/2005_press_releases/

For example, in the year 2000, one in two children lived in a single-parent family at some point in childhood. As of 2004, three out of five children under the age of six were cared for by someone other than their parents on a regular basis and three million children were reported as victims of abuse and neglect. One child or teen dies every three hours from gunfire.⁵ Amazingly, these are just the statistics for the United States. We are constantly bombarded with news of nations at war or threatening war.

John Robinson lived in a very different time than the one we live in yet, in some ways, it was very similar to our own. True, travel was not as common, yet he traveled in England, to Holland, and sent a part of his congregation to a world not yet known. Obviously, families were not in the same condition as today, but some scholars estimate the death rate of the bubonic plague alone may have reached 50% in Europe⁶ (80% known in one of England's villages). What type of impact did that have on family life? How many children were raised by one parent or were

[112005/11142005.xml](#). In domestic travel expenditures for the 2007 alone totaled 642.7 billion dollars. <http://www.tia.org/Travel/econimpact.asp>.

⁴ According to *Our Town*, 43 million Americans move each year: that's one in five. The average number of times a person moves in their lifetime is eleven. *Our Town*, "Moving Statistics": <http://www.ourtownamerica.com/sponsor/movingstats.php#top>.

⁵ National Education Association, <http://www.neahin.org/programs/schoolsafety/gunsafety/statistics.htm>.

⁶ Joseph P. Byrne, *The Black Death* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004), 60.

orphaned? Of course, there is no way of knowing. Altercations between countries occurred throughout the world and often escalated into armed conflict. Yes, John Robinson lived in an era that was strikingly similar to our own.

Yet in other ways it was also unimaginably different. Many people never traveled far from their place of birth. Medicine was still in its primitive state as were the modern comforts we take so for granted today. No running water, no electric, no furnace, no internet, no telephone, no grocery store – the list goes on. If a person moved, it was generally a permanent goodbye to family members left behind. Mail delivery was infrequent and unreliable. Often, world news took months, even years to reach interested parties. It was an age when expressing a political or religious disagreement to the wrong person could cost you your life.⁷ While we could continue to draw parallels and contrasts between our times and his, let us continue on and, set the stage as it were, by probing into some of the people and events of the time in which John Robinson lived.

The political intrigue that occurred during this era is enough to confuse even the most ordered of scholars. For example, just over twenty-five years before Robinson's birth reigned one of England's best known

⁷ Arthur Jay Klein, *Intolerance in the Reign of Elizabeth Queen of England* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918), 41.

kings, Henry VIII. During his life he went through six wives, made two of his legitimate heirs illegitimate, authored a defense of Roman Catholicism, disentangled himself and his country from the same Roman Catholic Church he had defended, fashioned a new church for England, was involved in the construction and improvement of several of England's more significant buildings, annexed Wales, and wielded more unfettered power than any other English monarch.

Henry's death did not do much to bring about stability for England's citizens. His son, Edward VI, took the throne for six years, dying at the age of 15, but bringing about more protestant changes, including the *Book of Common Prayer* under the oversight of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury.

After his death and following the nine day reign of Lady Jane Grey, Henry's daughter, Mary, took the throne. Just like her mother, Henry's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, Mary was staunchly Catholic. During her five year reign she revalidated the marriage of her mother and father (Henry had invalidated it and declared her illegitimate), incited local riots by marrying Philip II of Spain, turned England back to Roman Catholicism, executed approximately 300 religious dissenters, and became known as "Bloody Mary".

After Mary's death in 1558, Queen Elizabeth I took the throne. The daughter of Henry's most famous wife, Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth ruled

England for 45 years. Her reign saw England's power and influence increase worldwide. The Elizabethan era had begun and embraced a variety of accomplishments. Playwrights William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson were all English children of this era. During this time Francis Drake became the first Englishman to circumnavigate the globe. Philosophical and political views were outlined by Francis Bacon. Of course, one of the most well-known accomplishments associated with this period was the settlement of North America.

Elizabeth was a steady and decisive ruler. "Although I may not be a lioness," she once said, "I am a lion's cub, and inherit many of his qualities. . ."⁸ While she returned her country from her sister, Mary's, Catholicism to a Protestant form of worship, it was not as revolutionary a change as her half-brother Edward had proposed and certainly not satisfactory to those of puritan leanings.

Elizabeth reigned in a male dominated world during a time when it was thought that women could not rule. She managed to unite her people to such an extent that, at her death, most of them were Protestant. The puritan dissenters were simply Protestants wanting more reform. She appreciated the arts and scholarship and encouraged her courtiers to do the same. One of her most memorable successes was

⁸ Rosalie Maggio, *The New Beacon Book of Quotations by Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 52.

when she defeated the most powerful man in the world, King Philip II of Spain, after he sent the Spanish Armada against England in 1588.

Succinctly put,

“A country once ravaged by internal war and depression was now, despite external war and more depression, on the way to becoming a major power. Peace at home had brought order and law, a rising prosperity, a spreading over the globe, great things in the arts, a remarkable people. No one would pretend that the sixteenth century was an ideal age...Yet the state was built anew, government restored and reformed, enterprise encouraged, faith rekindled. The good past survived, the bad past died.”⁹

Along with the political upheaval that England encountered there were the recurring episodes of the Bubonic Plague. Probably the worst metropolitan outbreak in England happened in 1563 and then extended to a national outbreak. During John Robinson's lifetime there were several outbreaks just in England.¹⁰

Worldwide it was also a time of significant events. During this century, the deadliest earthquake on record, the Shaanxi Earthquake, occurred in China. The French wars between the Catholics and the Huguenots erupted and Spain unified with Portugal. It was the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Ottomans, and the Spanish conquest of Mexico. It was an era of conquistadors, inventors, and theologians. While

⁹G.R. Elton, *England Under the Tudors* (London: The Guernsey Press Co. Ltd., 1991), 474.

¹⁰JFD Shrewsbury, *A History of Bubonic Plague in the British Isles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 189.

at one time historians attributed many of these events to the Renaissance, that is not the suggestion here. However, as Elton reluctantly concurs, “there was a Renaissance in the strictest sense – a rebirth of English poetry in particular – the merest glance at the writings of the day will confirm beyond question.¹¹ Undoubtedly, it was a time of transformation on a variety of fronts.

A comprehensive register of famous people of that day cannot be listed here. A few of the more well-known ones include Martin Luther who posted his 95 Theses and Leonardo da Vinci, famous artist and inventor. Magellan and Elcano became the first to circle the Earth. Ignatius of Loyola founded the Society of Jesus while Gustav I of Sweden, restored Swedish sovereignty and introduced Protestantism to Sweden. The sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, conqueror, and legal reformer, ruled the Ottoman Empire. John Calvin, a theologian, reformer, founded Calvinism. Ivan IV ruled Russia while Michael the Brave, the national symbol of Romania, united three provinces under his rule. William the Silent was the main leader of the Dutch revolt against Spain and Miguel Cervantes penned some of the greatest Spanish works. Finally, Admiral Yi Sun-sin of Korea was the inventor of the Turtle Ships (an early type of armored

¹¹ Elton, *England Under the Tudors*, 430.

warship) and is respected as one of the greatest military leaders of all time.¹²

Inventions during this time period also abounded. A new contraption called the spinning wheel revolutionized the textile industry. The first flush toilet was introduced, the first portable watch was invented, and Galileo Galilei created the thermometer. Yet these innovative ideas were not unusual for this time. Others included Copernicus' development of the heliocentric theory in which he proposed that the earth revolved around the sun, not the reverse. It was during the sixteenth century that the Gregorian calendar was adopted, that Ponce de Leon and Balboa sighted the eastern edge of the Pacific Ocean, and that Coronado saw the Grand Canyon. The phenomenal sixteenth century – it was into this period of exploding knowledge, astounding religious revelations, tumultuous political upheavals, arrogant seekers of power, and unsurpassed giants of history, that John Robinson was born.

Not much is known about John Robinson's childhood. Even the exact date and location of his birth has been questioned. Timothy George writes that he was born in 1575¹³ although Keith Sprunger

¹² Clarence Norwood Weems, ed. *Hulbert's History of Korea*, vol. I (New York: Hillary House Publishers, Ltd., 1962), 376.

¹³ Timothy George, *John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition* (Macon: Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1982), viii.

questions whether in 1575 or 1576.¹⁴ Davis suggests he was probably born in Gainsborough.¹⁵ Walter H. Burgess later wrote that he was born in the hamlet of Sturton le Steeple which was also the home of his wife, Bridget White.¹⁶ Sprunger concurs.¹⁷

Apparently the oldest of three children born to the elder John Robinson and his wife, Anne, the younger John attended grammar school and was admitted to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge in 1592. He leaves us no recollection of his early days and we know little about the family's social standing. It is generally thought that he came from a moderately well-to-do family as throughout his life there were several significant periods of time that he was without work or any other visible means of support. He also bought a large piece of property where they lived in Holland and printed many books, whose sale was forbidden in England.¹⁸ However, his wife came from a well-to-do yeoman family, so the support could have come from her side as well.

¹⁴ Keith Sprunger, "John Robinson," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23847?docPos=4> (accessed 9 December, 2009).

¹⁵ O.S. Davis, *John Robinson: The Pilgrim Pastor* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1903), 56.

¹⁶ Walter H. Burgess, *John Robinson, Pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers: A Study of His Life and Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Howe, 1920), 11.

¹⁷ Sprunger, "Robinson", *Oxford DNB*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 406. Davis, *John Robinson*, 56.

Four years after gaining entrance to Corpus Christi, Robinson attained a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1596. His rise through the academic ranks was a rapid one and he was tutored by Thomas Jegon, the brother of John Jegon, Master of the College.¹⁹ Robinson was elected to a vacant fellowship two years before receiving his Master of Arts in 1597.²⁰ In 1599 he became a reader in Greek and was made dean of the college the following year.²¹ Timothy George suggests that this may be “an indication of his superior abilities and, perhaps, of his close ties with the Jegons.”²² Davis notes that it was during the time he was a Fellow at the University that he worked as a Curate for the Church of England. He suggests that at some point during his academia Robinson’s “personal religious life began.”²³ There is no way of knowing this for sure. It may have, but it could have started in childhood.

One thing is certain. It was during these years of scholarly pursuit that Robinson’s depth as a person was nurtured and the extent of his knowledge increased dramatically. Dr. Timothy George suggests that the years Robinson spent at Cambridge, and the influence they had upon

¹⁹ Sprunger, “Robinson,” *Oxford DNB*.

²⁰ George, *John Robinson*, 60.

²¹ George F. Willison, *Saints and Strangers* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1945), 51.

²² George, *John Robinson*, 60.

²³ Davis, *John Robinson*, 63.

him, cannot be overestimated. The quality of men that walked the halls of that institution while Robinson was there were amongst the most remarkable those walls have ever seen. Cambridge possessed a strong puritan bent and had a definite liberal flavor. There was a certain laxness in “the enforcement of rigid uniformity of worship. Interestingly, the leaders of Separation were almost all universally Cambridge men.”²⁴

One of Robinson’s dominant personality traits was his “thorough respect for the learning and judgment of others.” In his book *John Robinson: The Pilgrim Pastor*, O.S. Davis suggests that it was probably during Robinson’s years at Cambridge that he began reading books supporting Separatism. However, men like William Perkins would have kept this doctrine resolutely in check.²⁵

John Robinson accepted the Stuart monarchy when, in 1603, Queen Elizabeth I died and James VI of Scotland became James I of England. The first Stuart monarch of England, his ascension marked the end of the Tudor reign. The son of Mary, Queen of Scots, James was a study in contradictions. Henry IV of France (or, perhaps, Henry’s chief minister, the Duc de Sully) nicknamed James “the wisest fool in

²⁴ Ibid., 62.

²⁵ George, *John Robinson*, 62.

Christendom."²⁶ Sir Walter Scott put the more scornful view quite succinctly:

He was deeply learned, without possessing useful knowledge; sagacious in many individual cases, without having real wisdom; fond of his power, and desirous to maintain and augment it, yet willing to resign the direction of that, and of himself, to the most unworthy favourites; a big and bold asserter of his rights in words, yet one who tamely saw them trampled on in deeds; a lover of negotiations, in which he was always outwitted; and one who feared war, where conquest might have been easy. He was fond of his dignity, while he was perpetually degrading it by undue familiarity; capable of much public labour, yet often neglecting it for the meanest amusement; a wit, though a pedant; and a scholar, though fond of the conversation of the ignorant and uneducated...He was laborious in trifles, and a trifler where serious labour was required; devout in his sentiments, and yet too often profane in his language...²⁷

James believed in the divine right of kings arguing that it was condoned by apostolic succession. He always had a problem with money and, in an effort to raise funds for himself, he sold honors and titles and fashioned sixty-two English peerages in contrast to Elizabeth who, in a

²⁶ Sir Walter Scott, *The Fortunes of Nigel* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2004), 72. Indeed, William McElwee named his book on the study of James I after Duc de Sully's phrase. Nonetheless, he appropriately notes that, "he was not such a figure of scorn to his contemporaries as he has become to historians." See William McElsee, *The Wisest Fool in Christendom: The Reign of King James I and VI*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), 277. However, more recent scholarship challenges this view. See W.B. Patterson's *King James VI & I and the Reunion of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

²⁷ Scott, *The Fortunes of Nigel*, 72.

forty-five year reign, created only eight.²⁸ In 1611, James dissolved Parliament and, in that same year, the King James Bible was published.

John Robinson preached a sermon in celebration of the third anniversary of James I deliverance from the Gowrie Plot. This plot occurred in 1600, when brothers John and Alexander Ruthven were implicated in a conspiracy to kill the king. They were executed and their estates were seized.²⁹ When Robinson gave his message, two of Bishop Jegen's informants were present. They reported a few days later that Robinson was a "restlessly critical, yet hopeful young religionist" who rejected the extremes of Separatism but was hopeful James would bring about some additional reforms.³⁰

Yet it seems that it was about this time that John Robinson's breach with the Church of England was initiated. Many believe that when the campaign of King James I to suppress religious freedom ended the academic freedom at the universities, Robinson resigned rather than work

²⁸ Titled nobility in Britain, the five ranks in ascending order are, baron, viscount, earl, marquees, and duke. Title may be either hereditary or granted for life. Sir John Bernard Burke, *Burke's Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Peerage Baronetage and Knightage Privy Council and Order of Precedence*, 99th ed. (London: Burke's Peerage Limited, 1949), lxii.

²⁹ James abolished the name of Ruthven, extinguished any family honors, and decreed that the barony of Ruthven would, henceforth, be called the barony of Huntingtower. Sidney Lee, ed. *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. L (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1897), 19.

³⁰ Stephen Brachlow, "John Robinson and the Lure of Separatism in Pre-Revolutionary England" *Church History* 50 (September, 1981): 292.

in that environment. Francis Dillon suggests that it was when Richard Bancroft³¹, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, made it a law that all thirty-nine articles must be conformed to (as opposed to only those concerning the faith and sacraments) that the “final breach between the extreme Puritans and the Established Church” occurred. He argues that it was at this point that “Robinson saw no future in what he viewed as a corrupt Church and retired to his birthplace, Sturton-le-Steeple . . .”³² Whenever it was, it seems certain that he considered the hopes he had for reform to be beyond reach – at least within his lifetime. Why else would he feel the need to separate from the Church of England and risk everything he had to join together with a group of social and religious rebels?

It could have been any one of the above-mentioned reasons. It also could have been something as simple as his following the custom of the time. Those who were fellows were not allowed to be married, so

³¹ Richard Bancroft (1544-1610) was consecrated as the Bishop of London in 1597 and was present at the death of Queen Elizabeth I. In November of 1604 he was appointed as the successor to Whitgift in the see of Canterbury and in 1605 was sworn onto the Privy Council. He demanded discipline and exact conformity within the church. For disobedience to the *ex animo* form of subscription, over 200 clergymen were deprived of their compensation. In 1608 Bancroft was chosen Chancellor of the University of Oxford and was the “chief overseer” of the King James Version of the Bible. He died 2 November, 1610. Interestingly, it was in the nineteenth century that the *ex animo* form of subscription was changed to a simple assent.

³² Francis Dillon, *The Pilgrims: Their Journeys & Their World* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975), 77.

Robinson may have merely resigned his fellowship when he married Bridgette White of Sturton le Steeple. Another interesting event in this year was one of the major outbreaks of the Bubonic Plague.³³ It seems that death has a way of causing people to consider their life and what is really important. So it may have been with John Robinson. As he wrote in his essay *Of Death*,

We should think seriously of that part of our life, which remains unfinished, that we may provide things necessary for it; and also of our death, that we may cut off superfluities, and use that moderately, which we must not use long. The saying, Nothing more certain than death, and yet nothing more uncertain than the hour of death [Bernard], is common, and commonly abused. The certainty of it should teach us moderation in the use of the world and all worldly things, and that "we abuse them not, because the fashion of this world passeth away." 1 Cor. vii.31. ³⁴

Perhaps, it was a combination of all of these reasons. Whatever his motivation, John and Bridgette moved to Norwich where he took a position as assistant minister at St. Andrew's under the Reverend Thomas Newhouse. Newhouse was an older man and, incidentally, an avid devotee of one William Perkins.³⁵

³³ F.P. Wilson, "Illustrations of Social Life IV: The Plague," Shakespeare Survey Volume 15: The Poems and Music. Ed. Allardyce Nicoll, Cambridge University Press, 1962 Cambridge Collections Online, Cambridge University Press available from http://cco.cambridge.org/extract?id=ccol0521064287_CCOL0521064287A011; Internet; accessed 12 March 12, 2009.

³⁴ John Robinson, *The Works of John Robinson, Pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers*, ed. Robert Ashton, vol. 1 (London: John Snow, 1851), 256.

³⁵ Willison, *Saints and Strangers*, 51.

Considered by many to be one of the foremost contributors to the puritan movement, Perkins was a student at Christ's College, Cambridge, where he eventually became a Fellow and gained international renown in 1597 with his publication *A Reformed Catholike*. A moderate puritan, Perkins influenced some of the great thinkers of his era. They include people such as William Ames, a radical puritan who eventually became Professor of Theology at Franeker; Thomas Goodwin, a puritan preacher who gained recognition as the chaplain to Oliver Cromwell; the master of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, Samuel Ward; the poet, Phineas Fletcher; Thomas Draxe, author and clergyman of the Church of England; James Ussher, Primate of All Ireland and Anglican Archbishop Armagh; Richard Montagu, master of Sidney Sussex, bishop of Winchester, and chaplain to James I; and Thomas Taylor, neoplatonist and the first to translate the complete works of Aristotle and Plato into English. Taylor, in turn, influenced people such as William Blake, Shelley, Wordsworth, Emerson, Alcott, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Most importantly for this author, Perkins wielded a profound impact on the subject of our study, John Robinson.³⁶

The century before John Robinson met William Perkins was a tumultuous time for the little village of Norwich. The wool trade had

³⁶ George, *John Robinson*, 62.

increased the town's wealth significantly and by the early sixteenth century Norwich paid the highest taxes of any provincial town in England.³⁷ However, forty percent of its wealth came from less than thirty citizens.

After a series of major setbacks throughout the sixteenth century the town persuaded a group of Dutch weavers to move to their city to revive their textile trade. It seems significant that initially a small group of Dutch were brought to Norwich who would be followed by larger numbers immigrating there during the 16th century. John Robinson, in 1607, would lead his small band of followers to the Dutch for protection. Undoubtedly his contact with natives from the Low Countries contributed to his decision to flee to Holland. On-going religious persecution in the Low Countries³⁸ increased the rate of immigration so that by 1579, with a population of 16,000, nearly a third of that were immigrants.³⁹

It also appears that Norwich was the largest town in the country outside of London. When Henry VIII confiscated the monasteries, he seized the property himself or gave portions to his favorites. The Duke of

³⁷ John Cannon. "Norwich." *A Dictionary of British History*. 2004, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O43-Norwich.html> (accessed 31 March, 2009).

³⁸ The district now forming the kingdoms of Holland and Belgium, and the grand-duchy of Luxembourg." *Oxford English Dictionary*.

³⁹ Paul Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 132.

Norfolk obtained a large part in Norwich⁴⁰ and in 1602 the Duke of Norfolk, the premiere Duke and premiere Earl of England, built his palace in St. Andrew's.⁴¹ Though it had wide open spaces, housing was still crowded and confined and increased the spread of disease.

So, it was to this troubled city that John Robinson began to minister. He arrived probably sometime in 1604, only one year following the ascension of James I to the throne and two years after the plague killed 3,000 residents of that city. It was during his years in Norwich that John and Bridgette welcomed at least two of their children, John and Ann. They eventually had a total of nine children, only six of whom lived past infancy.⁴² So it was, essentially, in Norwich that John Robinson began his ministry. It was here, as an assistant minister, in the midst of death and disease, political and religious struggle, that the theology and theories he discussed while in school, became a reality - a practice, as it were.

⁴⁰ A.D. Bayne, *A Comprehensive History of Norwich* (London: Jarrold and Sons, 1869), 195.

⁴¹ *A General History of the County of Norfolk intended to Convey All the Information of a Norfolk Tour with the More Extended Details of Antiquarian, Statistical, Pictorial, Architectural, and Miscellaneous Information*. Vol. III (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1829), 1172. Norfolk is a descendent of John Howard, the first Duke of Norfolk after the Mowbray line died out. The current seat of the Duke is Arundale Castle in southern England. The New York Times, June 27, 2002. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/27//duke-of-norfolk-roman-catholic-leader-86.html>. Because of duties he holds as Earl Marshal, Norfolk is one of only two hereditary peers automatically admitted to the House of Lords, without being elected by the general body of hereditary peers. P.L. Dickinson, "The Duke of Norfolk," *The Independent*, 26 June, 2002. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/the-duke-of-norfolk-646451.html>

⁴² Dr. Jeremy Dupertuis Bangs, director of The Leiden American Pilgrim Museum, interview by author via e-mail, Leiden, Holland, 10 February, 2007 and 8 December, 2009.

Next to the preaching of sound doctrine, the “communion of the saints” became the paramount issue to this young preacher. What approach would allow the church to become the true “communion of saints”? This was the goal: to allow all true Christians, as one body, to contribute to the group. This doctrine is included in the Apostle's Creed⁴³ and is taken from I Corinthians 12 where the Apostle Paul is comparing Christians to a single body. In the Catholic canon, this term is used to include the Church Militant (the church alive on earth), the Church Suffering (those undergoing penance), and the Church Triumphant (the church already in Heaven).⁴⁴ Those churches that believe in the intercession of dead saints use this Scripture to defend their practice.

John Robinson would not have believed in the intercession of dead saints, but he would have believed that it was important for true Christians to gather together to contribute to each other's lives. This approach is also validated by the Biblical reference found in I Corinthians 14:26, “How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying. “

⁴³ See Appendix I.

⁴⁴*Catholic Dictionary*. Ed. Peter M.J. Stravinskias (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, Publishing Division, 2002), 211.

However, for the common people, the unlearned, the “everyday” person on the street, the issue was baser in nature. They lived in a time when the average life expectancy of an English man who had reached the age of 21 was 47.25 years.⁴⁵ Women of the Tudor era could expect to reach the ripe old age of thirty.⁴⁶ The infant mortality rate, of course, varied according to place and to social status. For example, from 1550-1599 the English High Aristocracy had an infant mortality rate for children under the age of one year of 190 infants for every thousand born.⁴⁷

So the “communion of the saints” was about relationship, fellowship, friendship, family. This would have been extremely important to a people who stood by helplessly while their relatives were destroyed by an unknown, unnamable disease; and it would have been tremendously necessary for a people who experienced wide-spread death and disease. When one loses biological family, the church family becomes all

⁴⁵ H.O. Lancaster, *Expectations of Life: A Study in the Demography, Statistics, and History of World Mortality* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1990), 8.

⁴⁶ Alison Weir, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 6.

⁴⁷ M. Bar-Ilan. “Infant Mortality in the Land of Israel in Late Antiquity,” in *Essays in the Social Scientific Study of Judaism and Jewish Society*, eds. S. Fishbane and J.N. Lightstone (Montreal: Concordia University, 1990), 3-25. The current infant mortality rate for the United Kingdom is 4.85 deaths per every one thousand live births and ranks 193rd out of 224 countries reported. *Rank Order – Infant Mortality Rate*. (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 2009) <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/rankorder/2091rank.html>.

the more important. Thus, "The question of theory became a question of practice."⁴⁸

While it may initially appear to the modern-day reader that a more contemporary understanding of theological differences were the bases of Robinson's disassociation with the Church of England, this was not the case. In Robinson's mind, it never was. It was not a question of the virgin birth, the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Nor was it a question of praying to the dead, liturgy, or the worship of Mary, the mother of Jesus (though Robinson certainly disagreed with these later points). For him, it was always a question as to the form of polity. As Richard Hooker wrote in 1593, "Nor is it possible that anie forme of politie, much lesse of politie Ecclesiasticall, should be good, vnless God himselve be author of it."⁴⁹ Thus, for Robinson the worship of God could not be pure and undefiled unless it came from a proper, or godly, form of government. "For how can that worship of God please him, which is not according to his will?"⁵⁰ God must be both the object and appointer of our worship.

⁴⁸ Davis, *John Robinson*, 77.

⁴⁹ *Oxford's English Dictionary*, rev. March, 2009, s.v. "polity" http://dictionary.oed.com.libproxy.unh.edu/cgi/entry/50182896?query_type=word&queryword=polity&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=PLF3-A4c8w-3906&hilite=50182896 (accessed 9 December, 2009).

⁵⁰ Robinson, *The Works of John Robinson*, 31.

John Robinson, ever the seeker, was not one to be put off by roadblocks, hardships, or confrontations. He was not afraid of truth and he was not afraid to change. As he saw the Church of England, the state it was in, the needs of the people, and the call of Scripture, his preaching changed. This sensitive, searching, promising individual made a decision that, unbeknownst to him, would influence world history: he turned from Reformer to Separatist.

CHAPTER TWO –

THE CHOICE FOR SEPARATION: A STEP INTO HISTORY

For how can that worship of God please him, which is not according to his will?¹

John Robinson, *Of Religion*

Robinson's journey into Separatism is difficult to map but his arrival there is indisputable. Amazingly, not only did this promising, intelligent man of integrity turn to Separatism, he made his mark by fashioning it into something that worked. He did not follow the ways of other Separatist groups. On the contrary, he was able to reign in and apply the spirit of the law, not just the letter of the law.

When James VI of Scotland was announced as the future king of England, the puritans held high hopes. James came from a Protestant background and Scotland had embraced Protestantism under the influence of John Knox. Although James' mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, remained a Catholic, he was raised a Protestant and the moderate

¹ Robinson, *The Works of John Robinson*, 31.

puritans entertained great expectations that James would further the reforms they had been unable to realize under Elizabeth.

John Owens and other representatives of the puritan interests presented their concerns to James in the Millenary Petition, so called because one thousand ministers were said to have signed it. In response to this, James convened a conference, held at Hampton Court Palace, because of the London outbreak of the Bubonic Plague. Though there were several points presented in the document with which the king agreed, the bishops prevailed and the puritans' dreams for church reform were dashed. James informed them that they had better comply with the Church of England "or else I will harrie them out of the Land, or else doe worse."²

In demanding this conformity, James I unknowingly created some of history's greatest heroes. These heroes were ordinary people, meeting together to worship God in a manner they deemed appropriate. They gleaned their conviction from Scripture hoping that others would see the way, but were prepared and determined to go it alone, if need be.

Of course, the initial intent had been purification of the Church of England from within, not separation from it. The forceful puritan, Thomas

² Thomas Fuller, *The Church History of Britain*, vol. 10, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1845), 18-19.

Cartwright, insisted that a true reformer must work from within the Church of England, never from without. It was a grievous sin to separate from the current church, even though misguided.³ “We make no separation in the church, but attempt to separate all those things which offend the church, that all, being united in the unadulterated doctrines of the gospel, may be more closely joined together in all the bonds of truth.” He protested the “love of Puritanism and church confusion.”⁴

He believed that the Biblical model of church structure was not being followed and that there needed to be a more thorough application of Biblical principles. Although elements of puritan thinking can be glimpsed in Wycliffe, Tyndale, and Hooper, it is Cartwright who became the “archspokesman” of Puritanism and initiator of “a specifically Presbyterian phase of Puritanism.”⁵

When Queen Mary I took the throne, numerous Protestant leaders had gone into exile. After Mary's death and when Elizabeth was crowned, many of those exiles returned with further ideas for reform. But Queen Elizabeth was not sympathetic to the type of Calvinism they were

³ Davis, *John Robinson*, 14.

⁴ Rev. B. Brook, *Memoir of the Life and Writings of Thomas Cartwright, B.D., The Distinguished Puritan Reformer; Including the Principal Ecclesiastical Movements in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (London: John Snow, 1845), 321.

⁵ Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570-1700* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 43-44.

promoting. She was attempting to mediate between the Protestants and Catholics, not the Church of England and the puritans. When it became apparent that there would be no progress toward reform, another movement evolved called "Separatists." While this faction had its roots in the puritan ideology, it took the "purification" a step further.

About 1580 the pastor of a church in Cambridge became convinced that puritan reform had not gone far enough. Robert Browne believed that it was "the whole ecclesiastical system was unscriptural, and therefore unacceptable to God."⁶ Thus, he decided that "separation was necessary in order to obtain salvation."⁷

From what we are able to gather from his writings, Browne basically proposed three doctrines:

1. The church is a company of people committed to God which is under the headship of Christ. They hold the powers of government, discipline, and organization.
2. These churches must give to and receive counsel from other sister churches.

⁶ Michael E. Moody, "Robert Browne," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <http://www.oxforddnb.com.libproxy.unh.edu/view/article/3695?docPos=1> (accessed 13 December, 2009).

⁷ Davis, *John Robinson*, 16.

3. The church and state are separate. Therefore the government leaders have no authority to direct spiritual affairs.⁸

As Browne tried to model his churches after this template, disaster ensued. This type of democratic form of church government tended toward what the Scriptures warned against being, "carried about with every wind of doctrine."⁹ No longer was Christ the head of the church, the people were. Browne, though an extremely gifted man, was unable to control his congregation. He ended up returning to the Church of England and was despised by both puritan and Anglican alike.

The second stage of development in the Separatist movement involved two men: Henry Barrow and John Greenwood. They agreed with Browne that the duty of separation was imperative. Where they both differed with Browne was in the structure of the church. They tended toward a more aristocratic approach. Members were to be meek, submissive, and loving. While the authority of the church technically rested with the congregation, the elders held their office as a trust, and the true church lay with them.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid. 17.

⁹ This refers to the Scripture in Ephesians 4:14. "That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive . . ."

¹⁰ Davis, *John Robinson*, 21.

At the same time as these doctrines were being explored, the social condition of England was also in tremendous turmoil. The previous agrarian society was quickly becoming more and more urban and the village economy was being replaced by a centralized one. This influenced everyone, from the king to the peasant; from the housewife to the clergyman.¹¹

Historians have long wondered why people were willing to hazard so much and leave what was so familiar to risk their fortunes, their positions, their very lives on a church structure that was untried, illegal, and unpredictable. Those who most often joined these groups were not reckless troublemakers. Indeed, many of them such as John Robinson were well-educated, promising individuals with bright futures ahead of them.

Yet, as the economic, social, and political conditions of the clergy changed, so did Robinson's approach to the religious system. He studied the Scripture and began leaning, not just toward a puritan view of church structure, but toward a Separatist one. He was convinced that the current order in which the church government was run by bishops was in error and called the system a "popish ordering of ministers."¹² The Church

¹¹ Brachlow, "Lure of Separatism," 9.

¹² George Selement, "The Covenant Theology of English Separatism and the Separation of Church and State," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41 (March 1973): 67.

of England, as he saw it, was not a true “communion of Saints.”¹³ Believing that he was living in the last age, he decided that he must separate himself from the Church of England the way the Lot separated himself from Sodom.¹⁴

When and how Robinson made his decisive leap into Separatism cannot be traced. Norwich, the town in which Robinson lived, had been the recipient of Robert Browne's controversial preaching and the location of Browne's first congregation formed itself into an independent covenanted community. There were, however, also many influences at Cambridge. People such as William Bradford and William Brewster who knew Robinson, who talked with him, and from whom he learned should not be overlooked. Because one of Robinson's dominant character traits was his respect of other's knowledge and evaluation, this would certainly be an especially important factor to weigh.

Joseph Hall (1574-1656) seems to indicate that Robinson's journey into Separatism took a different route than many of the time. When Robinson wrote to Hall after he later attained the position of bishop, he

¹³ Davis, *John Robinson*, 77.

¹⁴ This reference is found in Genesis 19:1-16 and refers to Abraham's nephew, Lot, who was living in Sodom and Gomorrah. God sent two angels to warn Lot and his family to flee from Sodom as He was going to destroy it. The angels had to practically drag Lot, his wife, and his two daughters from the town before fire and brimstone rained down upon it.

countered the charge that the Separatists were inadequately versed on the doctrine of election and argued that this, in fact, was true of the Church of England. Bishop Hall, who would later become a representative to the Synod of Dort¹⁵ was aghast at such an accusation but acknowledged that this doctrine was “amiss” on the part of some individuals.¹⁶

According to Frederick Powicke, most people apparently branded the evil of the church ceremonies and then refused to swear allegiance to the Prelates – in that order.¹⁷ However, Bishop Hall makes it seem as though it was the tyranny of the Prelates that first outraged Robinson. This was followed by, what Robinson saw as, the unscriptural basis of the ceremonies.¹⁸ In Robinson's work, *Of Authority and Reason*, he wrote that “To press immoderately men's authority in Divine things, is to wrong God's, which alone is authentic . . .”¹⁹ Certainly this would be a serious offense in

¹⁵ The Synod of Dort refers to a gathering of representatives from Switzerland, the Palatinate, Nassau, Hesse, East Friesland, Bremen, Scotland, and England in order to settle the controversy between the Arminians and the Calvinists. It was held in Dort (a town in South Holland) in the years 1618 and 1619.

¹⁶ Timothy George, “Predestination in a Separatist Context: The Case of John Robinson,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 15 (1984), 77.

¹⁷ Frederick James Powicke, “John Robinson and the Beginnings of the Pilgrim Movement” *The Harvard Theological Review*, 13 (Jul., 1920), 256.

¹⁸ Joseph Hall, “A Common Apology of the Church of England Against the Unjust Challenges of the Over-Just Sect, commonly called Brownists.” Vol. 9 - Polemical Works, (London: C. Whittingham. 1808), 459.

John Robinson's mind and, understandably, the reason he would view this as the first cause for separation.

Whatever the progression of his conversion to Separatism, it was not a decision without a price – and John Robinson knew that. It meant an end to any advancement within the ranks of the church and any subsequent recognition. Financially, it must have been difficult for him to provide for his wife and growing family and have his involvement in his chosen vocation so uncertain. The conditions of the time indicate the clergy were getting poorer and poorer due to economic and political circumstances while many of their parishioners were getting richer. Evidence indicates that Robinson was in the midst of a prosperous growing ministry.²⁰ Yet foremost in his mind must have been the fact that it was illegal. How could one forget what happened to Henry Barrow and John Greenwood?²¹

Yet John Robinson was not a man to be intimidated by difficulties or trials. If he believed that a particular direction was God's will for him, he followed it. If he understood that a certain issue at stake was directly

¹⁹ Robinson, *The Works of John Robinson*, 57.

²⁰ Brachlow, "Lure of Separatism," 4.

²¹ Barrow and Greenwood were hanged after many years in prison. Patrick Collinson, "Henry Barrow," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.libproxy.unh.edu/view/article/1540?docPos=1> (accessed 13 December, 2009).

addressed in Scripture, he stood with his interpretation of the Biblical approach, no matter what.

The radical puritan group that had nurtured John Robinson was a seedbed for the developing Separatist movement. Having been suspended before he actually joined the Separatist group, Robinson seems to have gone out of his way to avoid separatism. Yet in his debates with puritan colleagues, their discussion seems "to have confirmed, if not caused, his final decision."²²

Although there were many influences in the form of people and circumstances, there is no way of knowing if there was one person or event that was the primary contributor to Robinson's shift toward Separatism. It appears that it was a process, a journey, as this was not a decision he apparently made quickly or lightly. Robinson wrote that no one can know the will of God except by supernatural revelation. He then quotes from the Bible, "'And who knoweth God's will but by revelation of his Spirit' 1 Cor. ii.11, 12."²³ This would have been a serious matter to him. He believed that,

"Religion is the best thing, and the corruption of it the worst: neither hath greater mischief and villainy ever been found amongst men, Jews, Gentiles, or Christians, than that which hath marched under the flag of religion, either intended by the seduced, or pretended

²² Davis, *John Robinson*, 7.

²³ Robinson, *The Works of John Robinson*, 31.

by hypocrites. The Jews in zeal of God, such as it was, persecuted Christ himself to the death: and Saul in a kind of zeal of the law, was no less than a "blasphemer, persecutor, and oppressor." 1 Tim. i.13. Pompey the Roman having erected that *arcem omnium turpitudinum*, would not call it the stage, or stews, as it was; but the Temple of Venus [Tertullian]. And what shall we think of the Spaniards' Romish zeal? who, by their own bishop's relation in his first instance of Spanish cruelty, hanged upon one gallows thirteen innocent Indian women, in honour of Christ and of his twelve apostles [Glasse of Spanish Cruelty]. But God is not pleased with good intentions exercised in evil actions. . ."24

Thus, another possible reason for Robinson's turn to separatism was simple: he unequivocally believed it was the truth. If He truly believed it to be the truth, he would have sacrificed all to follow. "This religion is the means of God's worship, and withal, of man's happiness [Morneus]: which two main ends, God in great wisdom and mercy hath joined together inseparably, that the desire of the latter might provoke to conscience of the former, and the exercise of the former effectually promote, and further the obtaining of the latter."²⁵ So, in this sense, it would not have been a sacrifice. For worship of God and man's happiness are inextricably intertwined.

In his writing, *Of Created Goodness*, Robinson explains that nothing we do can be called "good" unless we first, do it to obey God; second, do it at all times; third, do it willingly while there is the opportunity; fourth,

²⁴ Ibid., 33.

²⁵ Ibid., 32.

do it according to our ability; fifth, offer what is needed, not what we have the most of; sixth, do good to all; and last, do good with discretion.

Why is it important to do good to all?

To good men we must do good because they do deserve it; to strangers, because they may deserve it, and do stand in need of it; to all men, because God deserves it at our hands, for them; to our friends, because we owe it them; and to our enemies to heap coals of fire upon their heads - the coals of charity to thaw, and soften their hardness."²⁶

This is an important point to grasp because Robinson believed that without his life grounded in the above-mentioned requirements for doing good, he would have accomplished nothing and not pleased the One whom he loved. He had to have believed his choice toward Separatism was the will of God (as mentioned in the first point above) or it was not good or right. To know toward whom the good was directed was also important because he realized there would likely be persecution and possibly death should he choose to separate. Thus, he had to be definitive in what was good as well as toward whom that good was exercised.

His study of the Scriptures seemed to also point him toward the need for separation and proved to be the bedrock of his belief that the church was an "organic spiritual community through the presence of

²⁶ Ibid., 19-21.

Christ."²⁷ Though he gives significant credit to his puritan predecessors, Robinson explains that he searched the Scriptures and that the truth he encountered was "as a burning fire shut up in my bones."²⁸ It is in words such as these that we catch a glimpse of the passion that drove him.

G.F. Nuttall has called his journey into Separatism "'a passionate desire to recover the inner life of New Testament Christianity."²⁹ Robinson obviously believed he understood, or at least was headed toward, the form of worship that was pleasing to God. He suggested that, "God is not pleased with good intentions exercised in evil actions."³⁰ Because of his theology of worship, it seems obvious to conclude that Robinson thought he was able to practice a true form of worship because he had received pertinent revelation regarding this.

The modern church member may look at this situation and wonder exactly what was the issue? So what if the church one is attending does not conduct the preferred form of worship. If it is against the law to leave the church, just go there and believe what one wants but just attend. However, for a sixteenth or seventeenth century believer there was more involved. It was not simply a matter of church attendance but a matter

²⁷ Davis, *John Robinson*, 9.

²⁸ John Robinson, *The Works of John Robinson*, xviii.

²⁹ George, *John Robinson*, 241.

³⁰ John Robinson, *The Works of John Robinson*, 33.

of salvation. Timothy George notes that “the tension between this sectarian ecclesiology on the one hand and a high predestinarian theology on the other is the controlling dynamic in his thought.”³¹

Robinson saw church government totally intertwined with salvation. The issue of church structure was an issue of salvation. He went so far as to believe that those who did not practice the proper form of church government were not members in Christ's kingdom. He possessed a passion for conducting worship with exacting consideration for the Bible and its direction.³² This may appear to be legalistic, but Robinson understood the relationship between the two as being totally interdependent.³³

In order to conduct proper worship, we must know Him as the object of our worship. In order to “know” Him, we must know and understand Who He presents Himself to be in the Scriptures. As He succinctly put it, “but if we will give God his due in religion, we must have him both for the object, and appointer of our worship.”³⁴ In other words, if a person said he knew God, but did not know the God the Bible makes

³¹ George, *John Robinson*, viii.

³² Brachlow, “Lure of Separatism,” 9.

³³ Davis, *John Robinson*, 10.

³⁴ Robinson, *The Works of John Robinson*, 31.

known, he would not know God. Therefore, if a person was worshipping God in a way not made known in the Scriptures, he would not be worshipping God either.

In his work *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*, Perry Miller writes, "the essence of the Puritan contention was that even the minutiae of ecclesiastical practice had been prescribed ages ago by Christ himself."³⁵ Stephen Brachlow contends the opposite. He does point out that a contemporary of Robinson criticized him "for believing that Christ had prescribed 'particularly every circumstance and rite' for the church."³⁶ However, he suggests that while Robinson held that the foundational aspects of the church and the Christian life were spelled out in the Bible, it was not prescriptive for every little detail of life. Indeed, he observes that Robinson once wrote, "if all the duties which lie upon the church to perform had been written in express terms . . . a world of worlds could not contain the books which should have been written."³⁷ Of paramount importance to Robinson was the spirit, or flavor, of the Scriptures. It was best to take the whole counsel of the Bible not isolated incidences.³⁸

³⁵ Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650* (Cambridge, Mass., 1933), p. 32.

³⁶ Brachlow, "Lure of Separatism," 296.

³⁷ Robinson, *The Works of John Robinson*, 48

³⁸ Brachlow, "Lure of Separatism," 296. This reference to the whole counsel of Scripture comes from a Scripture passage in Acts 20:27. Here, the Apostle Paul writes that he had

Of course, the Bible was invaluable to Robinson and others who believed like him. Some, however, saw the Bible simply as a doctrinal instrument. For example, Richard Bernard (1568-1641) was a puritan pastor, educated at Christ's College, Cambridge. He was a moderate Calvinist puritan who advocated a joyous approach to life. He was associated with future *Mayflower* pilgrim, William Brewster, and also knew John Robinson.³⁹

Bernard saw the Scriptures as a doctrinal instrument while Robinson saw it as the instrument of God Himself. Bernard believed that the knowledge of the Word was the paramount test for church membership. Robinson argued that doctrinal knowledge was not enough. The Spirit had to take hold of a person's heart and the Bible, in turn, must take hold of the outward man.⁴⁰

"not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." The famous commentator, Matthew Henry, referenced this passage in his commentary. He said that Paul had not "he had not shunned preaching those doctrines, which he knew would be provoking to the watchful enemies of Christianity, or displeasing to the careless professors of it, but faithfully took his work before him, *whether they would hear or forbear*. And thus it was that he *kept himself pure from the blood of all men*." Matthew Henry, *The Comprehensive Commentary on the Holy Bible*, ed. William Jenks (Brattleboro: Brattleboro' Typographic Company, 1839), 123.

³⁹ Interestingly, his daughter, Mary Bernard, married Roger Williams and emigrated with him to the new World in 1631. Richard L. Greaves, "Richard Bernard," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <http://www.oxforddnb.com.libproxy.unh.edu/view/article/2249> (accessed 13 December 13, 2009).

⁴⁰ Davis, *John Robinson*, 11.

Perry Miller argues, along with John S. Coolidge, that there was no alignment of visible church membership and the invisible church membership in the Separatist theology.⁴¹ However, in Robinson's mind there seems to be a strong identity between the two. There are not two churches. Members of the visible church are also members of the invisible one.

Brachlow qualifies this approach by cautioning his readers that this does not mean that Robinson thought that "there was an absolute identity between the two."⁴² Of course there would be hypocrites, but they would be known only to God. Thus, it was always important to look for the visible signs of election. Yet it was not the public confession that enabled a person to join the church, but the judgment of the congregation.⁴³

Whatever his reason for joining the Separatists, by 1610, Robinson's belief in absolute separation as being essential was unequivocal. He went so far as to contend that if a person was wrongly excommunicated by the true church, he should still be forbidden fellowship with the church. However, if a person remained in the fellowship of a true church, even

⁴¹ Brachlow, "Lure of Separatism," 11

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 13.

though he was wicked, communion should be maintained. This would, once again, indicate the importance he placed on true worship. A group of worshippers, although they may be in error in excommunicating someone, as long as they were worshipping the true God in a true manner should be permitted to have their excommunication stand.⁴⁴

The significant factor in uniting Separatists was the concept of covenant. It was this vehicle that joined them. This was the adhesive that bound them together. "For Robinson and other Separatists the church was 'the orderly collection and conjunction of the saints into and in the covenant of the New Testament: wherein the saints, are the matter; the covenant the form, from which two concurring, the church ariseth, and is by them constituted.'"⁴⁵ Thus, the covenant forged the social bond of church membership. Covenant, along with church discipline, was the bonding agent of the church community. The Separatists, therefore, looked at the term "covenant" as found in Scripture and took it very seriously. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as, "A promise made to oneself, a solemn personal resolve, a vowA formal agreement,

⁴⁴ Slayden Yarbrough. "The Influence of Plymouth Colony Separatism on Salem: An Interpretation of John Cotton's Letter of 1630 to Samuel Skelton." *Church History* 51 (September 1982): 294.

⁴⁵ Selement, "The Covenant Theology," 67.

convention, or promise of legal validity; esp. in Eng. Law, a promise or contract under seal."⁴⁶

First mentioned in Genesis 6:18, God made a covenant with Noah. Throughout the Bible there are numerous examples of covenant all the way from Genesis to Hebrews. We see God covenanting with people, people covenanting with each other, and tribes or nations covenanting with other tribes or nations. In making a covenant, the parties involved were essentially summoning God to be their witness and swore an oath to fulfill the covenant.⁴⁷

However, they had a much more highly developed view of the meaning of covenant. In a Scriptural context, there are 280 uses of the word "covenant" in the King James Version. Only seventeen of these refer to covenants made between people or groups of people. The other 263 refer to covenants between God and mankind. Scripture is also very clear on the importance of covenants. The Book of Ezekiel warns of the danger that awaits if one breaks a covenant. Galatians 3:15 states that no one should break or add to a covenant, even if it be an earthly one. In Romans 1, the Apostle Paul mentions the wrath of God revealed

⁴⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Covenant," Vol. III, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1989. Prepared by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner.

⁴⁷ *A Dictionary of the Bible, Comprising It's Antiquities, Biography, and Geography, and Natural History*, ed. by William Smith (Hartford, Connecticut: S.S. Scranton & Company, 1898), 173.

against ungodliness and unrighteousness. He then lists the attributes of such people, one of them being “covenantbreakers” and that such actions are “worthy of death.”⁴⁸

The Pilgrims obviously possessed a more thorough understanding of the importance, and implication, of covenant. Looking at it from a more Hebraic approach, the Jewish Scholar Daniel Elazar writes, “So pervasive is the covenantal system in the Bible that even God’s relationship with the natural order and lower forms of life is frequently portrayed in allegorical terms as a covenantal one.”⁴⁹

Robinson found great comfort in the covenant. He knew that he was a man subject to sin just like anyone else. Yet he also knew that he was under the watchful eye of those who were shared a covenantal union with each other. Each person within the covenant is a prophet, priest, and king under Christ and to each other.⁵⁰

Thus, when the modern-day individual hears about the *Mayflower Compact*⁵¹ made aboard the ship, the *Mayflower*, it was a covenant that was, indeed, a serious matter. It was this “history” that they took to the New World. They were invoking God as their witness and covenanting

⁴⁸ Romans 1:31, King James Version.

⁴⁹ M. Bar-ilan, “Infant Mortality.”

⁵⁰ George, *John Robinson*, 146.

⁵¹ See Appendix II.

together to form a "Civil Body Politic" and to obey the laws thereof. Whether or not some people's evaluation of it as America's first constitution is viable, it is significant in that it does state that for a government to be legitimate, it must obtain the consent of its governed.⁵²

Brachlow suggests that Robinson possessed a passion for doing things, in particular conducting worship, with an exacting consideration for the Bible and its direction. He writes that "Robinson believed God had been immediately present and actively engaged in directing, shaping, and compelling him forward in his own personal history from puritanism to separatism."⁵³

When John Robinson chose the path of Separatism he was really choosing a path of relationship. He believed that to participate in a form of worship that was contrary to the Word of God was sin and a form of idolatry. To choose idolatry was to choose separation from God.⁵⁴ It also abdicated the only visible understanding of God. He believed that "our religion is to God alone; and only the manifestation of it to men."⁵⁵ So, in reality, by choosing a Separatist way of life, Robinson entered into a

⁵² William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation: 1620-1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 75.

⁵³ Brachlow, "Lure of Separatism," 8.

⁵⁴ Robinson, "*The Works of John Robinson*." 68.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

deeper relationship with God. In making this choice, and choosing the way of sacrifice, John Robinson began to influence others in a way that would change the course of history.

CHAPTER THREE –
A MAN OF UNCOMMON SPIRIT

Yea, such was the mutual love and reciprocal respect that this worthy man had to his flock, and his flock to him, that it might be said of them as it once was of that famous Emperor Marcus Aurelius, and the people of Rome, that it was hard to judge whether he delighted more in having such a people, or they in having such a pastor. His love was great towards them, and his care was always bent for their best good, both for soul and body. They in like manner had ever a reverent regard unto him and had him and had him in precious estimation, as his worth and wisdom did deserve.¹

William Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation

Scrooby, located about eight miles from Babworth, was the meeting place of that little Separatist Congregation which John Robinson would eventually pastor. However, Richard Clifton, their first pastor arrived at Scrooby in 1606. He had previously served as rector for the All Saints Church in Babworth.² William Bradford mentions him as “a grave and reverend preacher, who by his pains and diligence had done much good, and under God had been a means of the conversion of many.”³

¹ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 18.

² Babworth is located approximately eight miles from Scrooby, at is located in Nottinghamshire, approximately three hours north of London.

³ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 10.

When John Robinson joined that congregation in 1607, he became Clifton's assistant.⁴ Sometime after his arrival in Scrooby, Clifton decided to go to Amsterdam, Holland. Richard Clifton records his arrival in Amsterdam as August, 1608.⁵ By the time others of the congregation traveled to Holland in 1609 and lived in Amsterdam for one year, Bradford wrote that John Robinson was their pastor.⁶

When, exactly, Richard Clifton left the Scrooby Congregation in the very capable hands of John Robinson is unclear, but the congregation flourished under his leadership during its years in Amsterdam and Leiden. We do know that when the Scrooby group moved from Amsterdam to Leiden, Richard Clifton stayed behind.⁷

It was during these years in Holland that Robinson exhibited his true greatness. He fostered a remarkable spirit within himself and his congregation which eventually would save some of their lives and influence history. But nowhere did his profound insight and action affect history more profoundly than when he rescued the Scrooby congregation from certain doom.

⁴ Francis Dillon, *The Pilgrims*, 75.

⁵ Edward Arber, *The Story of the Pilgrim Fathers, 1606-1623 A.D.: As Told by Themselves, Their Friends, and Their Enemies* (London: Ward and Downey, 1897), 96.

⁶ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 16.

⁷ Stephen Wright, "Richard Clifton," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <http://www.oxforddnb.com.libproxy.unh.edu/view/article/5671> (accessed 13 December, 2009).

When the small flock arrived in Amsterdam, they settled into what they thought would be their permanent home. No doubt they were pleased to have other Separatist worshippers nearby. This congregation, headed by Francis Johnson, had first gathered in London under the leadership of Henry Barrow and John Greenwood. The ensuing years had seen the executions of Barrow and Greenwood and the removal of the Ancient Church to Amsterdam. However, in spite of the hardships that this church had endured, now under Johnson's care, it was full of internal dissent.

Johnson encountered his most difficult undertaking during a time when he should have been the most at ease. He had survived persecution, five years of prison, weathered fierce Atlantic storms, and eventually escaped to the safe haven of Holland. But how to put into practice the freedom of worship that they had finally achieved proved to be too much for Johnson. "As all flesh is corruptible, so the pristine ideal also became corrupt as it took on the properties of reality. Johnson would find when he arrived in Amsterdam that the real work was only beginning and that the challenges he would face would no longer be only external and alien, but rather internal and familiar."⁸

⁸ Kenneth Scott Culpepper, "One Christian's Plea: The Life, Ministry, and Controversies of Francis Johnson" (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 2006), 119.

William Fenn writes that the Separatists, "as a class were a painfully cantankerous lot" and the accounts seem to substantiate this verdict. Certainly, what we know about Johnson's church seems to validate the claim. The very name "separatist" carries with it a particular awareness of a group of people seeking to separate themselves, in some way, from the mainstream, in order to attain some measure of independence and autonomy. Even Separatist theology seems to support this uncomely characteristic. Unfortunately, they seem to have overlooked the sourcebook of their church doctrine. Proverbs 18:1 states, "He who separates himself seeks his own desire, He quarrels against all sound wisdom."⁹

Francis Johnson stands in stark contrast to John Robinson and exemplifies the truth of the above statement. Although a learned man, Johnson did not evidence the same spirit as John Robinson. He refused to listen to his advisers and did not appear to nurture unity in the same way as Robinson. One way he manifested this trait was the manner in which he married his wife, Thomasine Leigh Boyes.

Previously married to Edward Boyes, a wealthy haberdasher, Francis wrote his brother, George, following Edward's death and indicated that he was a potential suitor. Asking what he thought about

⁹ Proverbs 18:1, New American Standard Version.

the match, George, along with many others in his congregation, believed that Thomasine had grown quite accustomed to her position as the wife of a wealthy haberdasher and did not consider her mode of dress or her air of aristocracy to be appropriate for a persecuted pastor's wife. He also informed his brother that if her pursued courtship, "many offenses would follow."¹⁰

These words proved to be prophetic and Johnson went even farther than the average separatist in promoting divisiveness within his own church. He ignored the counsel of his brother and friends, proceeded with the marriage, and apparently picked up offenses for his wife against his brother and others in the congregation. He excommunicated his brother, George, from the church, and turned against his father for refusing to stop associating with his brother, excommunicating him as well.

Though Robinson and Brewster tried to assist the church in Amsterdam, it got so bad that even the Separatists in London heard rumblings of a problem and wrote for clarification as to what was going on. When the group finally split, the one side brought a civil suit against the other for possession of the former meetinghouse.¹¹

¹⁰ Culpepper, "One Christian's Plea", 148.

¹¹ Walter H. Burgess, *The Pastor of the Pilgrims: A Biography of John Robinson* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Howe), 202.

In his dissertation *One Christian's Plea: The Life, Ministry, and Controversies of Francis Johnson*, Kenneth Culpepper notes that "Johnson presents an odious picture to many potential students of his life because he does not allow the idyllic hagiographical picture of a Christian saint, but rather that of a minister who often valued his ideals more than his friends and his personal prerogatives over the voice of his congregation."¹²

John Robinson stands in stark contrast to this description. Davis notes in his biography on Robinson that the Pilgrim Pastor was aware that the freedom, zeal, and knowledge, of the Separatist movement were not enough to sustain it. In fact, Davis writes, "there is something in freedom which begets strife unless this danger is resolutely mastered."¹³ The question historians have long asked is why John Robinson and his congregation appeared to be so different, not just from Johnson's church, but from other separatist congregations as well.

That Robinson knew how to master the inherent danger within Separatism and enabled his congregation to successfully practice Separatism without all the quarrels and bickering that were normally present in these congregations seems apparent. But how?

¹² Culpepper, "One Christian's Plea", 18.

¹³ Davis, *John Robinson*, 100.

One possibility is his thorough knowledge *and application* of Scripture. Robinson devotes a whole article to the issue. In *Of Heresy and Schism*, Robinson mentions I Corinthians 3 where the Apostle Paul talks about the jealousies and divisions within the church.¹⁴ He writes,

“No man can endure to be withdrawn from, nor easily dissented from, by another, in his way of religion; in which, above all other things, he makes account, that he himself draws nearest unto God. Therefore to do this causelessly, for not the separation but the cause makes the schismatic [Tertullian], though out of error or scrupulosity, is evil . . .”¹⁵

Having read about God's displeasure over such divisions, seeing the fruits of such effects in other churches around him, and going so far as to cause the schismatic “evil”, it seems safe to say that his understanding of the issue may have helped him further resolve to steer his congregation in a different direction.

But certainly there were other ministers who saw the same admonition from the Scriptures. Certainly there were other congregations who attempted to follow a course of unity rather than the division they heard of or saw within other congregations. What made John Robinson so different?

¹⁴ Both I and II Corinthians were written by the Apostle Paul to address the divisions that were occurring in the church. Obviously, schisms were not a problem confined to the 16th and 17th centuries.

¹⁵ Robinson, *The Works of John Robinson*, 72.

Another possible way was his view that all authority came from God and his belief that men's authority was limited. In his work, *Of Authority and Reason*, Robinson wrote, "To press immoderately men's authority in Divine things, is to wrong God's, which alone is authentic."¹⁶ Of course, this was an era when men's authority could be absolute at times. The King of England had absolute authority, not only in political matters but, as head of the Church of England, in spiritual ones as well.

Robinson also wrote, ". . . citation of human authority helps to wipe away the aspersion of schism, and singularity, when we can show that our assertions and practices have agreement with such as are in account in the churches."¹⁷ In other words, he saw the value of being connected with others as a check and balance for one's own interpretation of Scripture.

In addition, he also saw the importance of not taking offense. In his farewell speech he said that it was crucial to "be at peace with all men, especially with our associates *and that they do not give, or easily take, offense.*"¹⁸ He also quotes Matt. 18:7 which reads, "Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to

¹⁶ Ibid., 57.

¹⁷ Ibid., 58

¹⁸ Ibid., 371.

that man by whom the offence cometh!"¹⁹ He mentions that while they must not take offense at each other, they also must not take offense at God Himself. He notes general good must be a priority in their minds. As men are careful not to have a new house shaken with any violence, "I beseech you, brethren, much more carfull, y^t the house of God which you are, and are to be, be not shaken with unnecessarie novelties or other oppositions at y^e first settling therof."²⁰

Supplementing these admirable traits, it also appears that John Robinson walked in humility. He would have known the Scripture verse from I Peter 5:5 that says, in part, "For God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble." Also, Psalm 10:17, "LORD, thou hast heard the desire of the humble: thou wilt prepare their heart, thou wilt cause thine ear to hear . . ." ²¹ Philippians 2:5-8 also exhorts Christians to emulate the humility found in Christ Jesus. John Robinson, a student of Biblical theology, certainly would have been familiar with these verses, but so would other Separatist pastors.

So we again return to the question, what sets John Robinson apart? We have only the reports of those who knew him at the time. What

¹⁹ Matthew 18:7, King James Version.

²⁰ Robinson, *The Works of John Robinson*, 371. This was an exhortation given to the first travelers to the New World. This is what he is referring to when he mentions their "first settling".

²¹ I Peter 5:5; Psalm 10:17, King James Version.

transformed him from “one of the most rigid separatists from the Church of England”²² to this man who was known as “moderate and charitable”²³ and would eventually be remembered as a “man of uncommon spirit”?

There is one event in Robinson’s life that seems to mark a turning point in his attitude and speaks volumes to the student looking for clues. In the *American Biography*, Jeremy Belknap notes that after moving to Holland, Robinson met with Dr. Ames and Mr. Robert Parker. He writes that “Robinson was convinced of his mistake, submitted to the reproof of Dr. Ames, and became, ever after, more moderate in his sentiments respecting separation.”²⁴

Indeed, in 1617, the Seven Articles, signed by Brewster and Robinson, and sent to the Virginia Council, they:

- Acknowledged the 33 Articles of Religion
- Indicated their desire to keep spiritual communion with the Church of England
- Recognized the necessity of obedience to the king (except in cases where his commands would go against God's Word)
- Agreed to a qualified admission of the legality of bishops

²² Jeremy Belknap, “John Robinson,” in *American Biography*, Vol. II. (Boston, Thomas & Andrews, 1798), 161.

²³ *Ibid*, 176.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 162.

- Indicated that no synod or other body can have ecclesiastical jurisdiction without the king's approval
- Agreed to give superiors the honor they are due²⁵

He not only taught his congregants these qualities, he apparently practiced them as well. Robinson concluded that schisms arise from arrogance in the faith or from a lack of love. He cites Tertullian when he writes that, "schism is made, not by him who separates himself from the ungodly, but who departs from the godly."²⁶ As Davis put it, "There is something in freedom which begets strife unless this danger is resolutely mastered."²⁷

Certainly the Scooby Congregation had its share of masterful personalities: Richard Clifton, its first pastor, Edward Winslow, William Bradford, and William Brewster, to name a few. However, it was John Robinson who was able to command the respect of men of such high stature and, Davis notes, "at no point in his career are his foresight and sound judgment more in evidence than when he decided that it would be impossible for him to realize the ideal of the Separation in the

²⁵ *The Seven Articles from the Church of Leyden, 1617.* ed. George Bancroft (New York: New York Historical Society, 1856), 9-10.

²⁶ Tertullian, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Book VI.

²⁷ Davis, *John Robinson*, 100.

environment of Amsterdam.”²⁸ Along with being a man who understood authority, who did not easily take offense, who walked in humility, and submitted to counsel – he was also a man of uncommon intellectual capabilities. However, unlike some, his genius did not obstruct his ability to put ideas into practice.

Regrettably, the eventual immigration of those who traveled to New England often overshadows the profound influence Robinson had in the Arminian controversy. During this time, the accepted belief system was a Calvinistic one. Developed by several theologians including Martin Bucer and Huldrych Zwingli and influenced by English reformers such as Thomas Cranmer, Calvinism took its name from the French reformer, John Calvin. Summarily, Calvinism embraces five points.

Five Points of Calvinism

1. Total Depravity – because of the fall of Adam and Eve, every person ever born is enslaved to sin.
2. Unconditional Election – God chooses from eternity those who will be saved not based on any merit or virtue of their own, but totally grounded in God's grace.

²⁸ Ibid, 101.

3. Limited or Particular Redemption – those whose sins were atoned for by Jesus' death on the cross must necessarily be saved or His death would be in vain.
4. Irresistible or Effectual Grace – God's Holy Spirit can overcome all resistance. If God sovereignly purposes to save someone they will certainly be saved.
5. Perseverance of the Saints – because God is sovereign anyone He calls into salvation will remain faithful until the end.²⁹

While Calvinism emphasized God's sovereignty, Arminianism, stressed freedom of choice. Developed by Dutch Reformed theologian, Jacobus Arminius, it holds that God invites all people to salvation bestowing His grace to those who accept that salvation. However, it is up to each individual as to whether they will accept or resist Christ. A comparison between the two would look something like this.

Calvinism	Arminianism
Total Depravity	<i>Free Will</i> – though seriously affected by the fall, every person has the ability and the choice whether or not to apprehend God's grace.
Unconditional Election	<i>Conditional Election</i> – one's election is based upon God's foreknowledge of their response, not upon God's choice of who will receive grace to respond.

²⁹ Orville Dewey, *Discourses and Reviews Upon Questions in Controversial Theology and Practical Religion*, (New York: C.S. Francis & Company, 1852), 381.

Limited Atonement	<i>Universal Redemption</i> – Christ's death made it possible for all to believe, but becomes effective only if a person chooses to accept it.
Irresistible Grace	<i>Grace can be resisted</i> – the Holy Spirit draws people to Christ, but only if they choose to respond can salvation be received.
Perseverance of the Saints	<i>Falling from Grace</i> – this is one point upon which all Arminians do not agree. However, some believe that those who are truly saved can lose their salvation by not keeping up their faith. ³⁰

Robinson did not like controversy. However, although he was hesitant to do so, he ended up debating at the University of Leiden because he felt the subject was so important. Evidently, Poliander, the chief preacher of the city and a professor, invited Robinson to the forum. According to Bradford, although Robinson's small congregation considered themselves a simple congregation, the Lord helped Robinson and the truth won out. "...it caused many to praise God that the truth had so famous victory, so it procured him much honour and respect from those learned men and others which loved the truth."³¹

³⁰ This chart is compiled from a variety of sources, but especially from Dabney who is credited with developing the acrostic, TULIP, representing the five points of Calvinism. *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort*, ed. Anthony Milton (London: Boydell Press, 2002); Dewey, *Discourses and Reviews*. R.L. Dabney, *Five Points of Calvinism* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1992).

³¹ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 21.

It should be noted that this would not be an easy task. A man such as Poliander would be used to deliberating his views at an academic level. Also, this debate had been long in the making. This was not the first time, or the last, that the great minds of the time would meet to consider this issue. Nor was this debate merely academic, as one would encounter in today's university. These matters were life-changing subjects. There was one accepted approach to religious convictions. If a person did not adhere to the standard belief system, their entire life was in jeopardy. The ability to hold a suitable job, live in suitable housing, socialize with others; sometimes even one's life was in danger. This was the age of hangings, burnings at the stake, and disembowelments. Although Robinson's debate took place in Holland which practiced relative tolerance, the subject of Arminianism versus Calvinism was serious business.

It was also serious business concerning one's soul. Calvinism lends itself to the belief that Arminians could be inadvertently lulled into spiritual ease. For example, if you thought you had accepted Christ's atoning work on the cross, you could be placated into a false sense of security. One of the great concerns of Calvinists over Arminianism also concerned the issue of God's sovereignty. To take upon oneself the responsibility for security, one's salvation would wrest that authority and power, as it were, from the Almighty. John Robinson saw himself as defending the truth that held men's souls in the balance.

In spite of divisions, debates, and other more pragmatic issues that one faces upon moving, it appears that the Scrooby congregation handled their transition to Holland remarkably well. One of their concerns was that they would not be influenced by the relative ease that surrounded them and that they would maintain a "simplicity of the gospel."

It seems that simplicity is something that Christians are always seeking but seem to lose very easily. Christianity had barely begun when the Apostle Paul was writing to believers, "But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ."³² So what was it about Scrooby, what was it about John Robinson, that enabled them to retain the simplicity of the gospel that they sought?³³

There are two verses that specifically discuss the simplicity of the gospel of Christ. The first, 2 Corinthians 1:12, states that through simplicity we have "our conversation in the world."³⁴ The second verse, 2 Corinthians 11:3, we have already mentioned. It is here that St. Paul

³² 2 Corinthians 11:3, King James Version.

³³ Although the definition of simplicity may change from age to age, Robinson and his congregation evidently were able to maintain some type of lifestyle and theological doctrine that enabled them to embrace a way of life that represented a simplicity they were seeking in that era. *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "The state or quality of being simple in form, structure, etc.; absence of compositeness, complexity, or intricacy."

³⁴ 2 Corinthians 1:2, King James Version.

exhorts his readers not to be beguiled, as Eve was, and let their minds be corrupted from the simplicity of Christ.

For Robinson, simplicity came in a variety of ways. Since polity was the foremost reason for separation, this was the area in which the simplicity became most evident.

The simplicity of this action is striking. There was no bishop and no council of churches. There was no test of creed. The covenant was made between man and man, and its terms were very plain. This is precisely the action to which William Bradford refers when he says that these Separatists "joyned themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in ye fellowship of ye gospel, to walke in all his wayes, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them."³⁵

Certainly simplicity does not imply weakness for, as Davis writes, that to be a leader and molder of strong men requires a stronger man.³⁶ To influence men such as Winslow, Brewster, Carver, and Bradford, Robinson must have been quite a formidable person himself. Yet it seems that he was also a person with an uncommon temperament.

It was his ability to live in simplicity that led him to sacrifice, at a great cost, part of his Scrooby congregation to the New World. He was losing faithful followers and invaluable assistants in a time when Separatism was not a recognized form of worship. They had found

³⁵ Davis, *John Robinson*, 49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 355.

tolerance in Leiden to worship in the way they believed was Scriptural, but losing such men as Bradford, Carver, and Winslow must have been quite a blow. Not only did he lose their invaluable help, the remaining congregation must have felt the heavy blow of losing those to whom they were close and with whom they had risked their lives. Yet, Davis also observes that although it seemed to be the pastor's greatest sacrifice, it was destined to be the avenue of his greatest power.³⁷

Plymouth's survival hung in the balance. Fenn describes the climate as inhospitable, the soil as unfruitful, and strange diseases combined with the menacing unknown. Internal strife and bickering would have, undoubtedly, meant the demise of Plymouth Colony. We have every reason to believe that they would be no different than the any other Separatist group that had a penchant for divisions, cantankerousness, and intolerance. But they are different. And the difference lies in their mentor and teacher, John Robinson, and what he was able to impart to that small group now known as Pilgrims. The repeated teachings of John Robinson, "had put another spirit in them, as is evident from the report which Bradford gives of the sweet harmony of

³⁷ Ibid, 224.

their united life in Holland, to which also the magistrates of Leyden gave witness..."³⁸ Being different meant their survival.

Another important aspect of Robinson's influence concerns his impact over the societal relations of the colony. One of Robinson's concerns, and certainly a legitimate one, was what would bind them together in this New World? What was to demand civilized behavior? There was no leader of eminence among them. There was no pastor to hold them to the Word of God. What would keep them from falling into anarchy?³⁹

Jane Kamensky asks what Robinson suspected would fuel the fire of civil unrest. He never says. Perhaps it was, as Kamensky suggests. "Voluntary bonds are, Robinson knows, necessarily fragile ones. A polity 'knit' together by allegiance to the Word is easily undermined by words. He warns them of the dangers of heated speech, telling them that the 'taking of offense causelessly' or the giving of it carelessly will shake their little 'house of God' to its foundation."⁴⁰

³⁸ William Wallace Fenn, "John Robinson's Farewell Address" *Harvard Theological Review*, 13, No. 3 (July 1920), 248.

³⁹ John Robinson, "Certaine vsefvll Advertisements Sent in a Letter Written by a Difcreate Friend vnto the Planters in New England," in *Mourt's Relation or Journal of the Plantation at Plymouth*, ed. Henry Martyn Dexter (Boston: John Kimball Wiggin, 1865) xli.

⁴⁰ Jane Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue: The Politics of Speech in Early New England*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 56.

The years in Holland had made their distinguishing mark on this small group. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the *Mayflower Covenant* was, indeed, a serious matter. Even more interesting, given Robinson's concern over schisms, is the phrase where they pledge their "due submission and obedience" – not to a person or office, but to the laws established by the "civil Body Politick."⁴¹ Thus they understood the danger of mixing temporal and spiritual authority. John Robinson's Farewell Letter belays his understanding that they must "create a government based on civil consent rather than divine decree. . . .Written with crystalline brevity, the *Mayflower Compact* bears the unmistakable signs of Robinson's influence . . ."⁴²

One way in which the historian can appreciate the unusual spirit of Plymouth's people is to compare her to Massachusetts Bay. These later neighbors to the north stand in marked contrast to Plymouth in several different ways. By the time the Massachusetts Bay colonists arrived, the Plymouth settlers had already been there approximately ten years. They were different in the time of their arrival, in the number of colonists, and in the Separatist approach versus a puritan one.

⁴¹ Bradford, *Of Plymouth*, 110.

⁴² Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War*, (New York: Viking, 2006), 41.

Another way their differences were evidenced was governmentally. Massachusetts Bay leaders considered themselves as the possessors of divine authority and often consulted with the clergy. Plymouth viewed its leaders as bound by the same covenant and, thus, equals with them. Its elected officials derived their authority by the consent of the governed.

The second way concerned the separation of church and state. Massachusetts Bay had a more distinct differentiation than anywhere in Europe. While the State protected the church, it did not operate as an agent of the church. The church held no authority in government. As previously noted, they understood the danger of mixing temporal and spiritual authority. "In England excommunication carried heavy civil disabilities, in Massachusetts none. The right to vote and hold office was not revoked by loss of church membership."⁴³

The third difference was in attitude. Maxwell writes,

There was about the members of the Bay colony an arrogance which they brought with them from England. Using a kinder vocabulary, Edmund Morgan described it as 'that unabashed assumption of superiority which was to carry English rule around the world.' It's expressed in the belief that, even though they may have been chosen by the people, the autocratic leaders in Massachusetts ruled by divine right. And it's seen in the way that

⁴³ Richard Howland Maxwell, *Pilgrim and Puritan: A Delicate Distinction*, (Plymouth, MA: Pilgrim Hall Museum, Pilgrim Society Note, Series Two, 2003) Speech given in Plymouth, Massachusetts in March, 2003. <http://www.pilgrimhall.org/PSNoteNewPilgrimPuritan.htm>. Maxwell is the former President of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington , D.C.

these colonists related to others, including members of other English colonies as well as the Native Americans.⁴⁴

Maxwell also notes that certainly the influences on the Plymouth residents played a great part in the difference between them and Massachusetts Bay. Their exile, their terrifying journey on the *Mayflower*, the tremendous suffering they endured during their first winter at Plymouth, all played a role. "So also had their years of living in Holland's more tolerant society and the influence on them of one deeply spiritual man, John Robinson."⁴⁵

This difference from Massachusetts Bay would lead Henry Fell to write to Margaret Fell in 1657, "In Plymouth patent there is a people not soe rigid as the others of Boston, and there are great desires among them after the Truth."⁴⁶ There certainly was not the broadmindedness we would expect today, but given the times their forbearance is noteworthy.

Of course, the argument could be made that the reason for their forbearance was John Robinson's extraordinary openness to others.⁴⁷ Given the far-reaching influence he exerted in other areas, it seems likely. Geoffrey Nuttall noted that some scholars called Robinson's final belief structure "Semiseparatism."⁴⁸ More recently, Keith Sprunger, observed

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Burgess, *John Robinson*, 349.

that "absolute separatists saw these things as apostasy. Nevertheless, other theologians praised Robinson as a broad, moderate thinker. Although still a separatist in regard to the sacraments and membership, he had conversation with parties across a broad spectrum."⁴⁹ This does not imply that Bradford, or any of the Plymouth settlers for that matter, were tolerance personified. The indication here is that, in a comparative sense, there is a distinction worth mentioning.⁵⁰

John Robinson was not afraid to change. He allowed the views he held while in England to develop from those of a rigid Separatist to the more moderate view we see while he lived in Leiden. Yarbrough comments that this idea is evident in his Farewell Address.⁵¹ It was his ability to welcome change and embrace new light which proved to be the foundation of New England Congregationalism.

⁴⁸ Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints: the Congregational Way, 1640-1660* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), 10. Cynthia Van Zandt makes a noteworthy argument against this

approach in her book *Brothers among Nations*. Commenting on Bradford's rift with Isaac Allerton, Van Zandt suggests that they operated on two different visions of what the colony should be. Bradford's response to Allerton, she believes, is indicative of Bradford's intolerance of others. Cynthia Van Zandt, *Brothers Among Nations: The Pursuit of Intercultural Alliances in Early America, 1580-1660* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 86-115.

⁴⁹ Sprunger, *Oxford DNB*

⁵⁰ In an e-mail interview with Dr. Keith Sprunger, he indicated that he believes that while Robinson's ideas were not followed as well as they were in Holland, there is certainly "a case for some carryover to the new world." Interview by author via e-mail. 12 December, 2009.

⁵¹ Yarbrough, "The Influence of Plymouth Colony, 290-303.

Neither was he afraid to stand against society. He took a more temperate position on women's issues rejecting the common theology that they were "necessary evils." He instead believed them to be created equal in perfection to men.⁵² He assumed a position of relative tolerance toward those of differing views and encouraged his congregation not to refuse learning from others who might shed additional light outside their own "flow". Bradford was so well-versed in this approach that when the Catholic Father Gabriel Druillettes visited Plymouth, Bradford served him fish to eat, being Friday, even though such a custom was abhorred by the English puritans. Druillettes was duly impressed.⁵³

The view Robinson held towards the Native Americans, and encouraged Plymouth to hold as well, probably saved the colonists' lives. He wrote to Bradford,

"Concerning the killing of those poor Indians, of which we heard at first by report, and since by more certain relation, oh! How happy a thing had it been, if you had converted some, before you had killed any; besides, where blood has once begun to be shed, it is seldom staunch'd of a long time after. . .It is also a thing more glorious in mens eyes, then pleasing in Gods, or convenient for Christians, to be a terror to poor barbarous people . . ." ⁵⁴

⁵² John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 61-84.

⁵³ Gabriel Druillettes, "Jesuit Relations" (*La Mission des Jesuites chez les Hurons: 1634-1650*), Vol. 36. http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/relations/relations_36.html.

⁵⁴ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 198.

One can look back and see that had the Pilgrims taken a more aggressive stance toward the Native Americans, they could easily have wiped out these new settlers. However, because they approached them with a different spirit, a treaty was reached that would last almost fifty years.

Yet perhaps his most stunning trait was that Bradford and others of his era assert that he was free from factionalism; indeed, his own writings confirm this assessment. This certainly was not bad for a man steeped in a culture permeated with intolerance, strife, arrogance, and division.

All of this had a profound impact upon the Pilgrims and, in turn, the New World. Even more amazing was the continued influence Robinson had on them even though thousands of miles separated them from him. Through his letters, because of the spirit he planted and nurtured within them, by means of his teachings and example through the years – all of these profoundly influenced who they were, who they became, and the impact they would have upon a new civilization. Without a doubt, as previously mentioned, he unknowingly planted within them a spirit of unity and forbearance that would, in the course of time, literally save their lives.

CONCLUSION

And though they esteemed him highly whilst he lived and laboured amongst them, yet much more after his death, when they came to feel the want of his help and saw (by woeful experience) what a treasure they had lost, to the grief of their hearts and wounding of their souls. Yea, such a loss as they saw could not be repaired....¹

William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*

On March 1, 1625, John Robinson came to the end of his journey. According to Mrs. Robinson's brother, he fell ill on Saturday morning, February 22, 1625. However, he got up Sunday and preached twice that day. Each day that week he grew weaker and weaker, and although he had no pain, he died the following Monday.² "Mr. Prince informs us, in a note to the record of his death, that as he was held in high esteem both by the city and University, for his learning, piety, moderation, and excellent accomplishments, the magistrates, ministers, scholars, and most of the gentry, mourned his death as a public loss, and followed him to the grave."³

Though he never traveled to join that small band of Pilgrims that settled on American soil as he longed to do, though he never made a

¹ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 18.

² *The Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth in New England, in 1620*, ed. George B. Cheever, (New York: John Wiley, 1849), 157.

³ *Ibid.*

“great” name for himself during his lifetime, though he apparently died before his time - he ended up garnering the respect of friend and foe, penning some of the most well-known letters in American history. He also influenced a modest group of congregants to such an extent that the way they formed their small colony’s government would eventually impact an entire nation.⁴

In discussing some of Robinson’s qualities – his ability to listen to counsel, his desire for unity, his view of authority, not taking offense easily, his humility, his ability to live in simplicity, his willingness to sacrifice - it appears that these characteristics were ones that Robinson not only knew about but practiced in his own life. Significantly, he seems to have been especially gifted in cultivating them in his own congregation.

⁴ Although most historians now dispute this theory, I believe it is still worth consideration. From the very start, Plymouth voted for its governors. It had even been reported in England that Plymouth allowed women and children to vote. Why? I would suggest it was because people who visited Plymouth were offended at the relative semi-democratic approach it took. Although Robinson’s Bodinian desire to hold leaders accountable suffered a set-back following the Anne Hutchinson crisis, by 1648 the Cambridge Platform recognized the right of congregants to replace those in authority over them. In 1775, before America proclaimed its independence from Britain, it was reported in the *Pennsylvania Herald* that one of George Washington’s small ships, the *Harrison*, had captured two British ships and “made the prisoners land upon the same rock our ancestors first trod when they landed in America. . .” Thus, we see a glimpse of the possibility that the revolutionaries owned more of an interest in the Plymouth Pilgrims than is commonly thought. Library of Congress, *Naval Records of the American Revolution: 1775-1788* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1906), 12. Pilgrim Hall Museum, <http://www.pilgrimhall.org/Rock.htm>. J.S. Maloy suggests that, “the story of the colonial American origins of modern democratic thought more generally, like all such stories, begs as many historical questions as it answers; in short, it begs further research.” J.S. Maloy, *The Colonial American Origins of Modern Democratic Thought*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 177.

What Robinson fostered in his small group of followers, he also encouraged in his own family. His son, Isaac Robinson, came to the New World in 1631 and made his way to Plymouth. He followed in his father's footsteps in that he was ever open to the truth that others might carry. When he was one of three men chosen to try to show the Quakers the error of their ways, he, in turn, became convinced of the error of his own ways. Isaac was disenfranchised, removed from office, and excommunicated for turning to Quakerism. However, "He, like his father, was ready to suffer for his convictions."⁵

John Robinson possessed the essential qualities of a superior leader. He was born into an age that witnessed the handiwork of unparalleled inventors, artists, and scientists. He felt the ramifications of a break with the Church of Rome, the likes of which were unprecedented and that would eventually split many countries of the world in very much the same way the American Civil War would split its nation. He was a man of his times, shaped by Elizabethan England and influenced by its shift to the Stuart reign. In the midst of this era walked a man who, admittedly, would become a product of his times, but would walk a road "less traveled"⁶.

⁵ Walter H. Burgess, *The Pastor of the Pilgrims: A Biography of John Robinson* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Howe, 1920), 350.

⁶ Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken" in *Story, Essay, and Verse*, eds. Charles Swain Thomas and Harry Gilbert Paul (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1921), 341.

Perhaps John Robinson was a man not very different from the prophet Daniel. Both men were highly educated. Both men continually had to take a stand for what they believed was right, even though it might cost them everything. Both men had the admiration and respect of even their enemies. As King Belshazzar said of Daniel, "I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom."⁷ So the very same thing might have been said of John Robinson, a man of uncommon spirit.

⁷ Daniel 5:14, New International Version.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

I believe in God

The Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth:

And in Jesus Christ

His only Son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
Born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, dead, and buried;
He descended into hell;
The third day he rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven,
And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in

The Holy Ghost;
The Holy Catholic Church;
The Communion of Saints;
The forgiveness of sins;
The resurrection of the body;
And the life everlasting.¹

¹ William Barclay, *The Apostles' Creed* (Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, England: Arthur James Ltd., 2005), 1.

APPENDIX B

In the name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread Sovereign Lord King James, by the Grace of God of Great Britain, France and Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith, etc.

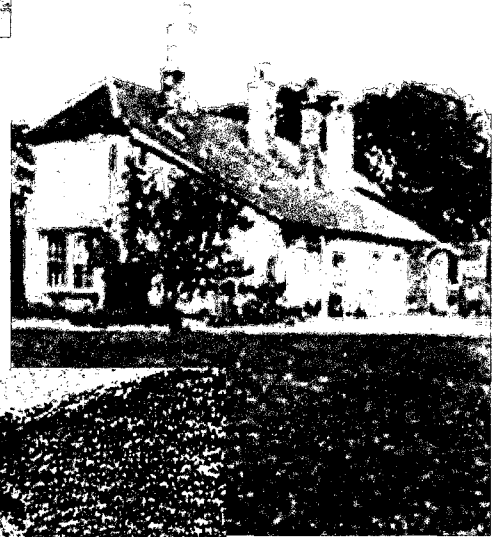
Having undertaken, for the Glory of God and advancement of the Christian Faith and Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the First Colony in the Northern Parts of Virginia, do by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and one of another, Covenant and Combine ourselves together into a Civil Body Politic, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute and frame such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cape Cod, the 11th of November, in the year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord King James, of England, France and Ireland the eighteenth, and of Scotland the fifty-fourth. Anno Domini 1620.¹

¹ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 75.

APPENDIX C



Pilgrim Way-

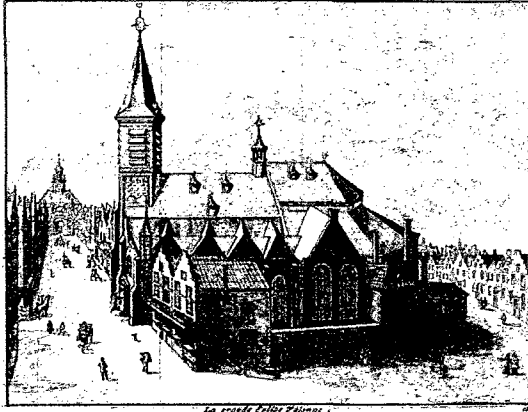


Scrooby Manor –

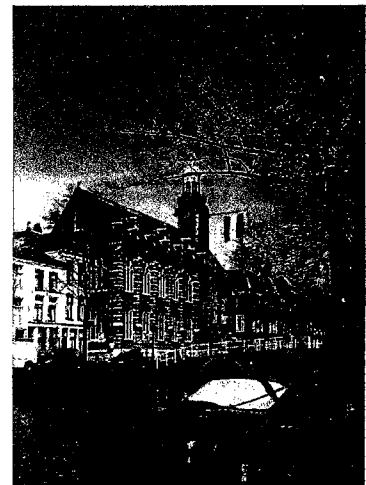


APPENDIX D

Members of this church were among the first European settlers of New England in 1620 and New Amsterdam (now New York) in 1624. Pilgrim Philippe DeLannoy (Philip Delano), ancestor of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was baptized here in 1603. François Couck and Hester Mahieu married here the same year. Jesse de Forest, leader of the 1624 migration to Guyana and New Netherland, was a member since 1615.



Below is a photo of two Pilgrim memorials which mark the walls of the Pieterskerk's former baptismal chapel. One commemorates John Robinson, the Pilgrim minister who lived directly across the street and was buried in the Pieterskerk in 1625.



Above is the oldest building of the University of Leiden. Theological debates were held in the lower room on the right end of the medieval convent chapel. Here Robinson debated with Arminius' successor Simon Episcopius. Now the room is part of the Museum of University History.¹

¹ Thanks to Dr. Jeremy Bangs' website www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~netlapm for a virtual tour containing these photos and descriptions.