

# The Soteriology of John Robinson, Pilgrim Pastor and Advocate of the Reformed Faith

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During the first two decades of the seventeenth century Holland became the home of a multitude of Englishmen; some seeking their economic fortune and others finding the Low Countries a haven of toleration away from the increasingly conformist ecclesiastical policies of James I (1603-25). In the city of Amsterdam, during the years 1609-10, there were no less than six English-speaking churches of varying size pastored by John Paget, Henry Ainsworth, Francis Johnson, John Smyth, Thomas Helwys and John Robinson.

During these decades of theological turmoil the issues of church polity and the doctrines of grace (soteriology) became the twin foci of controversy. The former was primarily an English issue which was gradually consolidated into distinct patterns of church government. Holland provided the tolerant climate needed for experimentation. The later controversy became a matter of international concern climaxing in the triumph of Calvinism at the Synod of Dort, 1618-19.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the views and involvement of one of these English refugee pastors, John Robinson (1575-1625), in the controversy over soteriology. Unfortunately, this topic has not received the attention it deserves. Historians, many of whom have little sympathy for Robinson's unwavering Calvinism, only treat superficially his soteriological writings. Theologians and historical-theologians of the Calvinistic tradition likewise bypass the writings of Robinson in deference to the more celebrated figures of the Arminian controversy; while other scholars of the Baptist or Congregational tradition dwell upon Robinson's ecclesiological concerns (polity, church/state relations, and religious tolerance) to the neglect of his soteriology. Furthermore, while the congregation of Robinson (the Pilgrim Fathers) has received the lavished attention of Colonial American historians, their shepherd and theological mentor has remained a remote figure. This oversight is largely due to the inability of Robinson to join his flock in the New World. Such neglect from all quarters is made even more culpable by the fact that the edited works of Robinson have been in print since 1851.[1] In our examination of the soteriology of John Robinson attention will be given not only to the content but also the context in which the Pilgrim pastor's view emerged. Finally, we will note something of the consequence and import of his views in conjunction with his contemporaries, especially the early English "General Baptists" (John Smyth, Thomas Helwys, and John Murton).

## I. The Context of Robinson's Soteriology

### 1. Synopsis of the Life of John Robinson

Puritan in Norfolk (1575-1604).[2] John Robinson was born in 1575 at Sturton-le-Steeple, Lincolnshire, a small town a few miles east of Scrooby, England. Little is known of his early life prior to his matriculation at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in 1592 at age seventeen. He took his B.A. in 1595 and his M.A. in 1599, after which he took orders and served as a Fellow of the college for several years. Cambridge, under the influence of William Perkins, Thomas Cartwright, Francis Johnson, and others, was a seedbed of Puritanism of both the separatist and non-separatist varieties. Robert Ashton suggests that young Robinson could well have been converted under the

ministry of Perkins, whom he held in high esteem.[3]

Robinson left Cambridge to begin his ministry in the Church of England at Norwich as a non-separatist Puritan. He was shortly suspended by the bishop in a dispute over ceremonies. By the time Robinson left Norwich to return to Lincolnshire in 1604 he was at least a nominal separatist.

Separatist at Scrooby (1604-08). Shortly after his return to Lincolnshire, Robinson was married to Bridget White, who bore him six children during their marriage. The joy of their union was conterminous with the increasing strife which followed the Hampton Court Conference of 1604, after which it became increasingly apparent that the new king, James I, was in reality an advocate of conformity. Scrooby experienced turmoil between the separatists led by John Smyth, Richard Clyfton, and William Brewster and non-separatist Puritanism, whose spokesman and pamphleteer was Richard Bernard. Robinson was progressively attracted to the separatist position and by 1606 he had affiliated with a group meeting in the Brewster mansion at Scrooby. This group, pastored by Richard Clyfton,[4] separated from Smyth's congregation (at Gainesborough) as the result of the hindrances brought about by the distance between the cities and the growing number of adherents. The two congregations, at least while in England, maintained close and amicable relations.

Continued threat of persecution led to the migration in 1607/08 of Smyth's Gainesborough church to Amsterdam. Their trip was likely financed by Thomas Helwys, a layman of the congregation. The Scrooby group was not successful in their first two attempts to leave England (Fall 1607 and Spring 1608); however, by August of 1608 the entire group from Scrooby had completed their relocation and were reunited in Amsterdam.

Exile at Amsterdam (1608-09). The stay of Robinson in Amsterdam, about six months, was far shorter than might have been expected. Amsterdam was a prosperous merchant city, a haven of tolerance inhabited by many Englishmen; nevertheless, Robinson's congregation faced severe financial problems occasioned by the shift from a rural to an urban environment. More significantly, Robinson found the theological climate, which abounded with wranglings over points of polity, to be incompatible with his desire for a tranquil setting in which to establish a congregation after the New Testament pattern. The tolerance of Amsterdam only succeeded in offering freedom to conduct pamphlet warfare and practice mutual excommunication.

On 12 February 1609 Robinson's petition to relocate was approved by the Leyden City Council and by May his congregation was settled in the smaller university town. Richard Clyfton, Robinson's colleague, did not remove to Leyden but rather joined the "Ancient Church" (i.e. the oldest separatist church at Amsterdam pastored by Johnson and Ainsworth), whose leaders were of an ecclesiological temperament more compatible with his own.

Pastor at Leyden (1609-25). Robinson arrived at Leyden the same year that another English-speaking church, pastored by Robert Durie, was organized. Durie's church was established under the structure of the Dutch Reformed Church, and thus was a part of the state church. Robinson's desire to remain a loyal, even if displaced, Englishman combined with disagreement with tenets of Durie's polity precluded any merger, but did not inhibit friendship. [5]

Having arrived in Leyden and located a suitable place for meeting, the Pilgrim church ordained [6]

Robinson as teaching elder and William Brewster as ruling elder. The church prospered in their newly found home away from home. Roland Usher estimated that beyond any reasonable doubt there were over two hundred men, women, and children who associated with the Pilgrims during their residence in Leyden; and this was in spite of Dutch restrictions against proselyting.[7]

The Pilgrims' arrival at Leyden also coincided with the escalating Arminian Controversy, which was fueled by the polemics and disputes of the Leyden faculty members--Gomarus and Polyander advocating the strict Calvinistic position against Arminius, Episcopus and the other Remonstrants. Robinson attended the lectures of the disputants and in 1612 was persuaded by Polyander to participate in the debate with Episcopus. Bradford describes Robinson's initial reluctance and subsequent acquiescence to Polyander's request.

Now Polliander, ye other professor, and ye cheefe preachers of ye citie, desired Mr. Robinson to dispute against him; but he was loath, being a stranger; yet the other did importune him, and tould him yt such was ye abilitie and nimblnes of ye adversarie, that ye truth would suffer if he did not help them. So as he condescended, & prepared him selfe against the time.[8]

Robinson's hesitancy to interfere in a Dutch quarrel was overcome by an appeal to defend the truth of the gospel against error, a response characteristic of the man. As was previously indicated by his withdrawal from Amsterdam, Robinson did not have a penchant for ecclesiological hair-splitting; however, when the very foundations of the gospel were threatened, he felt compelled to wholeheartedly enter the arena. His concern focused upon the theological aspects of the controversy to the exclusion of the attendant political issues.

After ten years of residence in Leyden the Pilgrims turned their attention to the New World. The reasons motivating them to migrate were varied: 1) the desire for unrestricted opportunity to propagate their views; 2) the missionary impulse to carry the gospel to the remote portions of the earth; 3) their preference of remaining English subjects while avoiding conformist restrictions; and 4) their dissatisfaction with Dutch morals (and Sabbath violations) which threatened to seduce their youth.[9] Consequently, they requested and received permission of the English monarch to establish an independent settlement in the New World.

The story of the migration with its attendant difficulties is well known to students of American history. The move was planned as a two-stage operation which allowed members to volunteer to be a part of the first expedition. It was further planned that the teaching elder (Robinson) would oversee the larger group, leaving the smaller group under the leadership of the ruling elder (Brewster). Less than half volunteered for the initial voyage; consequently, it was Brewster along with Bradford who sailed on 22 July 1620 for America leaving Robinson in Leyden to await the financial means to bring the others across the sea. This intended reunion never occurred and Robinson spent the last five years of his life with the desire but not the means to join his brethren. The abiding unity of the two groups is indicated by the delay in ordaining another teaching elder until after Robinson's death. Though Robinson was absent physically, his previous ministry among the colonists continued to give guidance. He was indeed the architect of Pilgrim theology in America in spite of the fact that he never reached the New World. Daniël Plooiij similarly evaluates Robinson's influence.

...he really was the Moses through whom God gave the newly born nation commandments that

should be their strength and their glory in the new country which he himself never saw.[10]

## 2. The Context of John Robinson's Soteriological Writings

Although Robinson is primarily known as a pioneer of independent church polity, it is noteworthy that over one-fifth of his three edited volumes of published works is devoted to discussion and defense of Calvinistic soteriology and related topics. We have previously noted Robinson's reluctance to enter Dutch quarrels or English fights over ecclesiology; he was not reluctant, however, to respond publicly and critically to the "errant" soteriology of his former associates: Smyth, Helwys and Murton.

Two works contain the preponderance of Robinson's soteriology: 1) *Of Religious Communion...*, published in 1614; and 2) *A Defence of the Doctrine Propounded by the Synod at Dort, against John Murton and His Associates*, published in 1624.[11] Of these two works the first treats the topic of soteriology less directly. The later portion of *Religious Communion* addresses the subject in response to published material by Helwys and Smyth. Helwys, having parted company with Smyth in 1610 returned to England with his small flock where he published *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, 1612.[12] While the writing was primarily an attack against Anglicanism, there were also criticisms of Robinson on the matters of infant baptism and the extension of the church covenant to infants incapable of personal faith. Robinson in treating public and private communion takes the opportunity to answer Helwys' criticisms by delineating the relation of the church covenant to the Abrahamic Covenant, which he considered to be identical with the New Covenant.

In this same work Robinson concludes with an extended response to Smyth's one-hundred-article confession entitled: *Propositions and Conclusions*, 1611.[13] This was Smyth's final and most comprehensive doctrinal statement, a document which was instrumental in effecting their later union with the *Waterlander Doopsgezinden* (i.e. baptism minded), a coalition of Dutch congregations holding essentially Mennonite doctrine. Robinson cites and responds to the articles of Smyth's confession with which he takes exception. These articles, with only a few exceptions, deal with matters of soteriology. His reply is motivated by the concern that his flock may be seduced by these "pernicious" views propounded by an old friend and held by Smyth's followers who resided in nearby Amsterdam.

Robinson's second and most comprehensive treatment of the doctrine of salvation was written and published a decade later: after the return of Helwys to England (and his death ca. 1616), after the death of Smyth (1612) and the merger of his congregation with the *Waterlanders* (1615), after the international Synod at Dort had formulated its *Canons and Rejection of Errors* to counter Remonstrant modifications of Reformed soteriology, and after the departure of Brewster for the New World. The purpose of the *Defence of Dort* was to provide a detailed rejoinder to John Murton, the successor of Helwys as leader of the General Baptists, who published: *A Description of what God hath predestinated concerning man, in his creation, transgression, and regeneration*. As also an answer to John Robinson, touching *Baptisme, &c.*, 1620.[14] This very readable tract is a dialogue[15] in which Odegos, a guide, brings Ereunetes, a searcher, to "sounder" (i.e. anti-Calvinistic) views on the topics: predestination, election, falling away, free-will, the original state of mankind, and baptism.

Ainsworth, likewise, answered the tract of Murton (*Censure upon a Dialogue....* 1623).[16] Unfortunately neither the reply of Ainsworth nor that of Robinson has received much attention from subsequent generations. This is lamentable especially in the case of Robinson, for his *Defence of Dort* is one of his most perceptive theological writings. His views are not novel, for they basically reflect the conclusions of Dort, but his manner of expression and argumentation is superior, in our opinion, to much of what is written on the subject today.

## II. The Content of Robinson's Soteriology

Our presentation of Robinson's soteriology proceeds upon a topical pattern resembling the order of argumentation established in Murton's *Description*. This approach is selected for two reasons: 1) there is no evidence of any major shifts in Robinson's thought over his career (as was the case of the General Baptists) that would necessitate a chronological treatment of his ideas; and 2) Robinson only treats the subject of salvation as a rebuttal of his opponent's presentation, hence it is not clear how he would have arranged his material if presenting it independently.

### 1. Predestination and Sin

"Calvinists make God the author of sin." This perennial charge of the Anabaptists against the Reformed (and Lutherans) was also a charge leveled against Robinson by the General Baptists.[17]

In response Robinson argues that his opponents both misrepresent him and err in their own understanding of the issue. First, as to their solution that God does not decree or foreordain man's sin but only permits the same, Robinson asserts that the very use of the term "permit" implies the ability on God's part to prohibit sin--that is, to create man immutably holy (a tenet which Murton rejects[18]). Robinson writes,

...if God could not have so made and ordered Adam, as that he could not have sinned, then God did not so much as suffer him to sin, seeing none can be said properly to suffer a thing to be done, save that he could hinder it, if he would. It were absurdly said, that I would suffer the wind to blow, or sea to swell, though I hinder them not, seeing that it is not in my power to hinder them.[19]

Furthermore, Robinson argues that the Scriptural data will not permit an understanding of God's action as mere permission. He cites many examples, the most pointed of which is the foreordination of the death of Christ (Acts 2:22, 23). He says,

That God suffered, and so decreed to suffer the wicked to kill his Son, is plain. If he had not decreed to suffer them, he had not suffered them; if he had not suffered them, they could not have done it: but that he only suffered them, is against the express words and meaning of the text, which saith, the wicked took him, "being delivered by God's determinate counsel." Is to deliver by the determinant counsel, to suffer only? So, where it is said that God's "hand determined" that which was done, it shows that God was a doer in the business, and not a sufferer only. If God only suffered them, that is hindered them not, he had no hand in it at all, but withheld his hand in meddling in it. How then could his hand and counsel determine, before whatsoever was done? Besides, if God only suffered the death of his Son, all the worth of our redemption by his death, vanisheth away: seeing that which God suffers only, is only evil and not good. Also by this perverse exposition, neither the Father gave

his Son, nor the Son himself for us to the death, which Scriptures everywhere affirm.[20]

Murton's simplistic solution, Robinson concludes, would logically lead to a denial of the atonement as an eternally determined, voluntary sacrifice.

Against Smyth, who argues for foreordination based upon prescience (Propositions and Conclusions, Article 9), Robinson responds,

...to conceive that God doth anything, in time, which he did not from eternity purpose to do as he doth it, is derogatory to his infinite wisdom and power: and, indeed, to deny him to be God, and to make him finite: in whom there is a change wrought, and a beginning, and growth of counsels.[21]

Simple permission on God's part, therefore, is incompatible with redemption and God's character (immutability). God, Robinson declares, does more than passively permit man's sin. He gives man the very abilities (e.g. that of taking and eating) that may result in sin. He "administers occasions" (e.g. the tree in the garden, the request of Israel to Pharaoh) which may provoke man to sin. He does not on such occasions employ "effectual impediments which might hinder sin, as he both could and lawfully might, if he would." [22] And further He takes the creature's unrighteousnesses and uses them to His own holy and righteous purposes.[23]

But in all of this is not God the author of man's sin? Robinson replies by first defining the term sin: So is sin only the absence and want of that conformity and agreeableness, which ought to be in the thought, word or work of the reasonable creature to the law of God...[24]

God, then, while being the author of man's actions, is not the author of the sinfulness of man's actions. In his elaboration upon this crucial distinction he notes that a "natural motion" (an action) of a man which is sinful in one instance may, if exercised on another object, be entirely proper. He illustrates,

...the very same natural motion which Adam used in taking and eating the forbidden fruit, upon any other fruit, had been no sin. The same natural act in which David practised adultery with Bathsheba, with his lawful wife, had been no adultery: the very same natural act and motion whereby Joab killed Abner and Amasa, if exercised upon a malefactor at the magistrate's command, had been no murder, but a work of just execution. The sin is therefore not in the very act, but in the misapplying it, or other vicious adjuncts...there is no sin in deed or action of body, which was not first in the faculties of the soul, the understanding, will and affections; for only the things "which come from the heart defile the man." Matt. xv. 8 {Matt 15:8}.[25]

Robinson's alignment with the Reformers against his former associates on this subject is clear.

His [i.e. Knox's] and our meaning then is, that which Christ our Lord also teaches, that 'not a sparrow falls to the ground' without God's providence. Matt. x.29 {Matt 10:29}. And where he speaks of God as the author, by his counsel appointing all things to the one part, and to the other; it is plain he intends it only of the ordering and governing of them, which they that deny, do in effect, pluck God out of heaven, by denying his sovereignty, and power over all his creatures in ordering them, and all their actions, to his own supernatural ends. The bitter curses which here they

break into in their ignorant zeal against him, and Calvin, and with them all others, the worthy instruments of restoring the gospel's light, after the darkness of Popery, into which these men are slidden back in no small measure, are like stones thrown upwards by them, which without their answerable repentance, will fall down upon their own heads.[26]

## 2. Election and Reprobation

Robinson's initial criticism of Murton's treatment of election (the second section of his book) is that this topic is considered by Murton to be an entirely new subject rather than an extension of the former.[27] The God who eternally foreordains man's actions, Robinson argues, also determines his destiny.

Robinson next recites a favorite illustration of the General Baptists in which Christ is likened to a merciful physician who enters the houses of sick men (without exception) and proclaims that He will heal all who will take the medicine that He will provide. Some, according to the parable, partake and are cured--these are the elect whom God foresees from eternity. Others, however, refuse because the medicine is bitter[28] and therefore remain uncured.

In the process of debunking this illustration Robinson launches his discussion of election and reprobation. First, he argues that the medicine offered by Christ is not a "catholic cure," intended potentially for all. He defers a defense of what is today termed "limited" or "definite" atonement to a later portion of his treatise, as will we.

Further, he argues that to limit the activity of God the Son to that of provision of a cure and external exhortation to receive it, is to fall far short of the biblical view. He says,

...God not only provides the medicine, Christ and his benefits, and by the gospel exhorts to the receipt thereof; and so leaves men to their own free-will indifferently without further doing. But that, withal, and above the former, he, by the inward work of his Holy Spirit given them, makes effectual the outward means, in 'opening the heart to attend the things spoken,' with reverence; in enlightening the understanding to discern and assent unto the same things as true and good, and that with particular applications; in bending the will efficaciously to consent to the same: and the affections of the soul to love and like them.[29]

After citing texts which corroborate this criticism he concludes with the following comment on John 6:44, which would anticipate any objection that Robinson has made the merciful physician one who force-feeds his cure.

Not that God draws men, as horses draw a cart, or by any violence, or compulsion against, or without their will; but he makes them by the inward work of his Spirit, joined with the outward word, of unwilling, willing; effectually driving away ignorance and rebellion, and so enlightening the mind, as to assent, and the will, to consent.[30]

The reception of the medicine (i.e. faith) is not the independent work of man, but rather the gift of

God, wrought by the Holy Spirit (John. 1:12; Eph 2:8). In terms of the illustration he observes, "So as not only the medicine itself, but also the hand to receive it with, which is faith, and a believing heart, is God's gift." [31]

One would have expected Robinson to include as a further rebuttal of the illustration a discussion of whether the Bible presents man as one who is spiritually ill or dead. He reserves extended discussion of depravity to a later section.

Having concluded his critique of the physician-medicine metaphor, he proceeds in a somewhat disorganized fashion (partly the fault of his style of point-by-point refutation) to clarify issues related to election and reprobation.

He insists that election is not the choice of foreseen qualities or virtues; but rather, it is the selection of persons who are devoid of any merit. Election conditioned on foreseen faith, or foreseen faith and obedience is weak at least at two points. First, it reverses the biblical order which places election prior to faith.

God's actual choosing therefore goes before our actual faith, holiness, repentance, and obedience, as the cause: and follows, then, not as an effect, as they mis-judge.

...these men will make God begin at the other end, and choose men because they are an holy and peculiar people, that is, having faith and repentance going before. [32]

Second, he places them on the horns of a dilemma: either they must add perseverance as a condition of election (which would preclude both falling from grace and assurance of salvation) or admit that the settled purpose of God may be voided, undone, and frustrated.

And here I demand of these men, what, if some of those so actually, really, and particularly chosen to salvation, as they speak, upon their faith and obedience, and to whom God hath so fully purposed, without ifs or ands, to impart the kingdom of heaven, do afterwards wholly fall away, as they hold any may, and many do, then all this actual, real, and particular choosing, and settled purpose of God, is void and frustrate; and God must unpurpose what he had formerly purposed really, actually and particularly; and undecree what he had formerly decreed. They should have therefore learnt in this place, from their more learned masters, to have added the condition of persevering to the end, without which it is certain, none shall be saved. But then they must needs rush upon the same desperate rock, with the other; which is that none are thus actually and particularly elect or chosen, till they be dead, seeing they deny all certainty of perseverance, to the living, not acknowledging any thus elect, either before the world, or in it, but after the world, and in heaven.

...Nothing in God is potential, but all actual. [33]

Again, Robinson aligns himself with Reformed orthodoxy in affirming the pre-temporal, unconditional, personal and effectual election of those who will be saved in time and glorified in eternity.

In discussing reprobation Robinson asserts that God remains both good and just in passing by those

not chosen or redeemed by Christ. Concerning the charge of injustice and lack of goodness, he responds,

...it is no swerving at all of God's goodness, if he extended not the grace of redemption to as many as he did the grace of creation: for then Christ should have redeemed the angels, who were partakers of a greater grace of creation, which he in no sort did. And if God did in justice pass by the angels that sinned, Heb ii.16 {Heb 2:16}: might he not in the same justice have passed by men also? And if in justice he might have passed by all (where he could not, in justice or possibly, create one man unjust, as no man will deny but our redemption by Christ was a work of God's mercy and not of his justice) is it injustice in him to pass by some, who also on their part take pleasure in unrighteousness, and so continue in their estate of impenitence, and unbelief, loving darkness more than light, because their works are evil?[34]

On one final issue that occupied the attention of the Reformed theologians of Robinson's day, that of infralapsarianism versus supralapsarianism, the Pilgrim pastor is less direct. Nevertheless, it is possible to clearly discern that Robinson sided with the infralapsarians without including criticism of the more rigid position. He says,

...we know God hates none before the world, otherwise than they are, and they are no otherwise than in God's decree and foreknowledge. He hates none actually, or by application of hatred, till they have actual, yea sinful being; but he hates them in decree only.... For damnation, we hold, that God decrees it toward none but for their sin, by him infallibly foreseen, and by them freely to be committed and continued in without repentance. For though God be moved only from within himself, and the love of his holiness, to decree the condemnation of the sinner; yet he doth not so decree to condemn him, but for sin, as the deserving cause, foreseen, and by him to be practiced.[35]

### 3. Adam, Original Sin and Free Will

The relation of Adam in his fall to his posterity, and the implications of the same for the question of infant baptism was a point of disagreement among Robinson's opponents.[36] The Waterlanders held that all men (including infants) are guilty of Adam's sin; yet, they have been restored to innocency by the death of the Second Adam, Christ. Thus, prior to actual sin (which according to them occurs after infancy, at least) children are innocent and do not need baptism. Smyth and Murton agreed with the Waterlanders that infants are innocent and thus not in need of baptism. They differed on the reason that infants are innocent. They affirmed that the command to Adam, with the penalty, did not extend to his posterity. Further, both taught the immediate creation of the soul by God (creationism), which they concluded was incompatible with inherited guilt. Thomas Helwys affirmed creationism as well; however, he also held that infants were indeed guilty of Adam's transgression. He objected to infant baptism on different grounds than Smyth, Murton, or the Waterlanders. Helwys taught that infants were not to be baptized because they do not believe.

Robinson replies to the views of Smyth and Murton in a similar fashion, even though his replies were separated by a decade. He seeks to clarify the relationship between Adam and his posterity. First, Robinson observes that many disagree with their contention that creationism precludes belief in original sin.

...they, generally, who think the soul to be created immediately, and infused, do not only hold original sin, but also show how they conceive it to be propagated. It is but presumption in these men, without answering what others so ordinarily bring to the contrary, thus to conclude, that, because the soul is immediately created, therefore, there is no original sin.[37]

Robinson does not quarrel with those who hold creationism and original sin; nevertheless, he indicates that traducianism, in his opinion, is "more agreeable unto truth." [38]

Consistent with traducianism, he holds that the mechanism of the propagation of the guilt of original sin is procreation. He denies the assertion that Ezekiel 18:18-20 (a favorite text of his opponents, which says that sons do not bear the punishment of their father) overturns his view.

The prophet speaks of such children as forsake sin, and repent, as the whole context showeth, which was to reprove the hypocrisy of the Jews, who complained of injustice from God in punishing them, who are holy, for their fathers' sins. Besides, all Adam's natural posterity were souls sinning in him; whom, in that his sin, we must not consider as a private person, but as the common father of mankind... [39]

Adam, Robinson affirms, is the common father of the race, the natural root of the family tree of man, whose progeny were in his loins at the time of the Fall.[40] There is throughout the discussion an emphasis upon realism as the answer to the question of why all are guilty in Adam. While Robinson does not have occasion to interact with the federalist position, widely held in Reformed churches, one might surmise that he would not have had serious objections to it. Traducianism and realism, it appears, provided him a more satisfactory explanation to the how and why of original sin than did creationism and federalism.

How is the will affected by the Fall? Smyth, again in opposition to Helwys, declared that Adam "being fallen did not lose any natural power or faculty... he still retained freedom of the will..." [41] Robinson corrects this blend of partial truth and error.

That Adam had, as well, freedom of the will after, as before his fall, is as true as that he was a man after, as before. For take away will from a man, and he ceaseth to be a man: and take away freedom of the will, in that which it willeth, and it ceaseth to be will. But here is the difference, that the same natural power of free will, which before was rightly ordered, and disposed only to good actually, though changeably, was afterwards corrupted, disordered, and clean contrarily disposed, til by supernatural grace, it was rectified and renewed. It is true, then, that sin destroyeth not the natural powers, or parts of soul, or body, but only corrupteth, infecteth, and disordereth them: whence also ariseth in the mind, ignorance, error, doubtings, and unbelief; and in the will, and affections, perverseness, and disorder, with manifold lusts, to the fulfilling and execution whereof, the bodily instruments are disposed.[42]

Adam and all of his descendants remain fully human; yet, they are unable to righteously employ their will apart from grace. They freely pursue sin.

Murton raises the issue of free will in the context of the ability of man to respond to or reject the gospel offer. Murton concludes that, "...in the work of regeneration, man may submit to it, or hinder

it."[43]

We have previously noted the response of Robinson to the ability of the unregenerate to receive the medicine proffered by the physician. Man needs a hand and heart from God, and not just a medicine and pep talk. Likewise, we cited Robinson's comments on John 6:44 to the effect that when God draws a sinner to Himself it is effectual. God's grace is sovereign and irresistible. He laments, "Oh that any made partakers of the free grace of God's Spirit dwelling in them, should deny the powerful work of it, to establish their own free-will!"[44]

Having responded to Murton's proof texts, Robinson summarizes,

We therefore conclude with the apostle, that God works in us both the will and the deed: not only by his word working on us, but by his Spirit working in us: not only by sending Paul to plant, by propounding strong arguments of persuasion, but also by giving the increase by the most effectual work of his Spirit, enlightening the eyes of the understanding to see the force of those arguments, opening the heart to attend to them, and so writing them in the same heart, and most inward parts, as they cannot be blotted out.[45]

#### 4. Redemption, Perseverance, and Perfectionism

Redemption. Under this general heading something must be said of the meaning, pattern, and extent of the redemption provided by Christ.

In the first place, Robinson found it necessary in the face of error taught by Smyth to reaffirm the classic Protestant doctrine of justification (which Luther called the article of the standing or falling church). Smyth, who had once affirmed forensic justification, successively shifted to the view that justification was both through the imputed righteousness of Christ for us and the inherent righteousness produced within us, to his final position which ignored the forensic nature of the doctrine and emphasized that our justification is based upon our regeneration.[46] This final position was the established position of the Waterlanders, and is an unmistakable evidence of their doctrinal sway over the idealistic, yet malleable Smyth. Robinson responds that Smyth's view confuses justification and sanctification by substituting the work of Christ in us for the work of Christ for us.

Our redemption, then, or justification properly taken, is in Christ, and not ourselves; as it should be, if it stood in our sanctification or the new creature, which is affirmed. Our sanctification, or renovation is an inseparable work of faith by which we are justified, Acts xv.9 {Acts 15:9}, but doth not answer the rigour of God's justice, nor can present us innocent, before his judgment-seat, being imperfect in this world, by reason of the "root of sin yet abiding in us, which we cannot pluck out of our hearts." ... That only can the righteousness of Christ do, being imputed by grace, and by faith received: "who was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." 2 Cor v. 21 {2 Cor v. 21}. Now as Christ became sin for us, not by having our sin dwell in him, but imputed unto him, so we become the righteousness of God, that is, perfectly righteous before God, by his righteousness imputed to us, and not by that which dwelleth in us.[47]

In order to aid his readers in distinguishing truth from error Robinson gives a summary of the pattern of God's work of grace in the individual. We include the passage in toto because it is perhaps his

most succinct summary of the doctrine of redemption as well as a noteworthy representation of the Puritan mode of expressing this popular theme.

This work of grace, then, in the general, God beginneth ordinarily by the ministry of his Word, and first of the law: which, through man's inability to keep it, convinceth and condemneth him, and so leaves him under God's curse: from whence also ariseth in the mind a servile fear of God and his judgements, with grief and sorrow in respect thereof, which is commonly called legal repentance, or (better) penitency, and so a despairing of all remedy in man's self. Rom viii. 3 {Rom 8:3}, and chap. vii.7 {Rom 7:7}; Gal iii.10 {Gal 3:10}. Then cometh the gospel of glad tidings, offering grace, and mercy unto those, who 'being weary and heavy laden,' do come unto Christ for ease and rest, by believing in him, Matt xi.28 {Matt 11:28}; which so many do as are ordained of God to eternal life, Acts xiii.[48] {Acts 13:48}; 2 Cor iii.6 {2 Cor 3:6}; ii.10-12 {2 Cor 2}: God with and by the same gospel ministering, and conveying the graces of his Spirit into the heart, by which a man becomes of a natural man, a spiritual man, and of these graces, first and principally faith, by which Christ is received, John i.12 {John 1:12}, and the life of grace begun, as Paul testifieth, Gal ii.20 {Gal 2:20}, that he liveth by faith in the Son of God. From which faith and the assurance of the forgiveness of sins, and so great love of God shed into the heart of the miserable sinner, ariseth, by reflection, as it were, a love again towards God, and from this love, a godly sorrow for sin wrought against so good a God: and from this sorrow, true repentance, and the turning of the heart from evil to good, with an hatred, fear, and earnest endeavor to avoid sin in respect of God's mercy: as on the contrary a love, desire, and constant endeavor of and unto whatsoever pleaseth him. Now all these, and all other truly spiritual graces, howsoever wrought by that one Spirit, and at one time, yet are in the order of nature and manifestation, one before another, and so faith the cause of the rest. Luke vii.47 {Luke 7:47}; 2 Cor vii.10 {2 Cor 7:10}; Ps ciii. 4 {Ps 103:4}, and cxxx.4 {Ps 130:4}; 1 Cor xii.4 {1 Cor 12:4}.[48]

As previously indicated, Robinson staunchly advocated to the General Baptists that the cross work of Christ had as its intention the actual redemption of the elect, the particular object of God's mercy. Christ's death, he reasons, because it is the death of God, would have been sufficient for all, if that had been the Divine intention.

...I acknowledge, that the death of Christ, is in itself sufficient for all, and every person in the world; and so might have been an effectual price for all, if it had pleased the Father, and him to have so ordained. But that it was the Father's purpose in giving his Son, or his, in giving himself to the death, to pay the price of the sins of the whole world, and of every particular person therein, and to satisfy God's justice for the same, we deny, and they in vain go about to prove. That Christ died for sinners, and the ungodly, and such as were dead, Rom v.6,8 {Rom 5}, we grant, as being the apostle's assertion: but that he died for all such, is their bold addition...[49]

Robinson responds to the passages employed by Murton in his defense of a universal restoration by Christ. The texts as well as the interpretations of Robinson are characteristic of the type common to our day, and thus will not be detailed. What is significant, perhaps, is the observation that even though over three hundred and fifty years have elapsed since these writings the content of this persistent (and important) debate has not been markedly improved upon.

Robinson repeatedly shows the connection between the extent of the atonement and the doctrine of perseverance.

From Rom v. (Rom 5) then, may be more truly, and I am persuaded undeniably, concluded these two things. 1. That Christ did not effectually die for, or reconcile, by his death, all men in particular: for then all should be saved by his life: and 2ndly, That whomsoever he so died for, and effectually reconciled, they shall be kept by the power of God, and of his grace, unto eternal life...

To conclude this point, they who either hold, that Christ effectually redeemed all from their natural corruption, or, that any truly justified and sanctified, may wholly fall away and perish, do divide Christ from himself, and make him a party Saviour; and a priest for some, to redeem them by his death, to whom he is not a king to save them by his life; and a Saviour, in part, to the very damned at the last day; freeing all of them from the guilt of their original sin; and many of them, even from one part of their actual sins, so much as they wrought, before the time of their falling away but not from the rest.... All who have any part in Christ, are in Christ, and so free from condemnation, Rom viii.5 {Rom 8:5}: and unto whomsoever he shall appear a Saviour they are his people and he shall save them from all their sins, and not from some part of them only.[50]

From the foregoing it should be obvious that Robinson, had he lived unto the time of the controversy surrounding Moise Amyraut in the decades ahead, would have not countenanced the hypothetical universalism of the school of Saumur. His phrase, "In God all things are actual, and not potential," captures his position.

Perseverance. The pilgrim pastor in his Defence of Dort gives careful attention to the exegesis of the texts offered in support of the contention that grace received may be lost. He notes in passing that the term "eternal life" itself argues against their position.

If this life which they have given them, and have (in the beginnings of it) even in this life, be eternal and everlasting; how can it be broken off afterwards? Or if it can be broken off, how is it everlasting and eternal?[51]

Further, Robinson reasons, if perseverance is denied and the elect may fall away, there can be no assurance of salvation; and assurance, he contends, is the essence of faith.[52]

His essay entitled, "On Equitability, and Perseverance in Well Doing," most clearly expounds the balance between the human and Divine aspects of our perseverance.

...Neither indeed can we be safe from being drawn away from God otherwise, than by continually drawing near unto him. For our way to heaven is up a hill, and we drag a cartload of our corruption after us; which, except we keep going will pull us backward, ere we be aware.

The Holy Ghost in those vehement exhortations of the faithful to perseverance, enforceth with so many promises, and threatenings, both shows therein man's proneness, and danger, in himself to fall away; and so affords the means, by which God will preserve his sanctified ones from apostasy; ...And, whensoever God either promises unto men, or purposeth in himself absolutely an event

touching any his good work by or in them; he withal both purposes, and promises, and accordingly affords them both means convenient, and a skill and will to use them; and therewith, an answerable blessing upon them, for infallible success.

...And so the same Christ our Lord, and Head, partly by his mediation and intercession with the Father; partly, by the continual supply of his Spirit assisting us in our weaknesses, and recovering us in our falls; and partly, by his Divine power restraining the enemies of our salvation most faithfully perseveres us in the grace of God; not suffering the living members of his body to be plucked from it; nor the habitation of his holy Spirit wholly, and forever to be possessed by his, and the elect's enemy, Satan.[53]

Perfectionism. A further word of warning is sounded by Robinson to protect his congregation from error rumored to be held by Smyth's followers--perfectionism,

But, lo! here another mischief; the persuasion of perfection in holiness, which these men would also have us think Mr. Smyth had attained, a little before his death. And it made well for the credit of the doctrine that he did not survive: for then the imperfections of his life, would have discovered the error of the doctrine. Yea, verily, if this were his faith here published, it is too evident how far he was from perfection. And for those who are in danger of this great and deep seduction, I will here insert a few things touching perfection.[54]

Again, it is the Waterlanders who provide the context of this remark. Their leader, Hans de Ries, was an advocate of perfectionism; a view which he likely borrowed from Dirck Coornhert.[55] While this tenet is absent from the several confessions authored by de Ries and Smyth, it is quite likely that perfectionism was believed by many of their adherents. Therefore, while there is no evidence that Smyth taught the doctrine, there is sufficient reason to conclude that pastor Robinson was not attacking a "straw man."

In his remarks on the topic, he states,

We acknowledge all the faithful perfect, and that perfectly, by Christ's perfect obedience and righteousness imputed unto them for their justification: for by that one oblation he hath perfected or consecrated forever them that are sanctified.... We acknowledge also in some men a perfection in degree, not absolute, but in comparison to others...

But for any such perfection in this world, as wherein a man stands not need continually to renew his repentance, and to purge himself of the remnants of sin, 'casting off the old man,' and 'putting on the new man,' and to grow in the knowledge and grace of God...is a most dangerous delusion...

Lastly, if any man in this life come to the perfection of leaving sinning, they must also leave praying, and so leave being Christ's disciples: for he hath taught all his disciples every day to ask the forgiveness of their trespasses...they must be past hope of Christ's coming in glory, for 'every one that hath this hope in him, purgeth himself,' as he is pure...[56]

## 5. Infant Baptism, the New Covenant, and Salvation

Separatism was born out of the conviction that the Church of England was either apostate or so far from remedy that to remain in her was to dishonor Christ. Having rejected the state church, the separatist congregations (such as those founded at Gainesborough and Scrooby) covenanted together to form a church body. In this covenanting process, the children of believers were considered to be a part of the congregation.

It was, therefore, a momentous occasion when Smyth, having rejected this covenanting principle, disbanded his church and proceeded to reorganize it upon the principle of believer's baptism. His self-baptism (by pouring) earned him the nickname, "Se-Baptist," and touched off a bitter controversy over the issue of infant baptism. Smyth wrote a pamphlet entitled *The Mark of the Beast* in which he equated the baptism of the Church of England with that of Babylon, the Harlot (i.e. the Roman Catholic Church).

Robinson was only one of many who responded in print to the writings of Smyth, Helwys and Murton on the subject of infant baptism. In his writings he defends the practice of infant baptism as a valid ordinance of the New Testament church.

At the outset Robinson admits that the New Testament does not explicitly teach that infants are to be baptized; nevertheless, he holds that infant baptism may be concluded as a proper inference when the New Testament is taken in its entire context.[57] He grants that unbelieving, and unbaptized "men of years" who embrace the gospel are to be baptized.[58] He will not accept, however, the conclusion that infants, because they do not exercise conscious faith, are not to be baptized.

He discusses the material in the New Testament which lends support to his position: Acts 2:38-39 {Acts 2}; 1 Cor 7:14 {1 Cor 7:14}; the baptism of households; and the bringing of infants to Jesus.[59] The foundation of his argument, however, is that there is a continuity between Israel and the Church, between the Abrahamic Covenant and the New Covenant, and especially between circumcision and baptism.

Robinson holds that there is both a covenant of works and a covenant of grace.[60] He outlines the differences between the testaments in a manner reminiscent of Calvin's *Institutes*. [61] He contends that the covenant of grace is expressed in a continuous manner from the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12), through the New Covenant promised to Jeremiah (Chapter 31 {Jer 31}) and is fulfilled by the church (Heb 8). He states,

The Scriptures do most plainly, and plentifully teach, that the covenant with Abraham and his seed, the Israelitish church, was the same with ours in nature (though diversely dispensed), and therefore the covenant of the gospel.[62]

To this he adds,

In all their disputes against infants' baptism, because they cannot manifest faith and repentance, are but the same quarrels which might have been picked of old against infants' circumcision.[63]

The covenant of the New Testament church is therefore to be coterminous with the covenant of grace, that is, to believers and their seed. Helwys, and his associates, charged that this conclusion of Robinson (which they too had once held) is not acceptable since it makes the faith of the parents the meritorious cause of their infants' salvation. Robinson replies,

...I do not say that infants are saved or condemned for the faith or sins of their parents, as he most truly accuseth me. The infants saved, are saved by the grace of God in Christ; which their faithful parents also believe, according to God's promise, 'I will be thy God, and the God of thy seed.' ... Yet it must be here and always remembered, that our question is not about the peremptory salvation or condemnation of any, but about their admission or non-admission into the visible church. And strange it is for this man to make it all one to be saved and to be one of the visible church; and to be condemned, and be out of it, specially for children; since he will have them all saved, and yet none of them at all to be of the church.[64]

Robinson in his writings does not deal with the problem of "covenant children" who never come to a profession of faith yet remain a part of the visible church. Had he lived a generation later, perhaps he would have addressed the problems faced by those advocating a similar ecclesiology/soteriology, the problems which gave rise to the Half-Way Covenant.

## Conclusion

In his parting address to his congregation on the eve of their sail to the new country Robinson urged his people to continue in their work of reformation and go beyond the gains of Luther and Calvin by being receptive to the further light that God should give them.[65] Floyd J. Taylor, reflecting on this advice, concludes:

Assuredly this is liberalism and might be paraphrased into that expression of faith used in many of our churches relative to The Progress of Mankind Onward and Upward Forever...

Robinson was an individualist. Theologically he was strongly Calvinistic...yet, at the same time he was amazingly tolerant of those whose views differed from his own. Calvinism was distilled in his personality to emerge as the prototype of liberalism.[66]

Taylor's estimate of Robinson's character and views, like those of others who have not taken the time to read the Pilgrim pastor in depth, is wholly unacceptable. Our previous presentation makes it manifest that Robinson was convinced that in the matter of soteriology the doctrines advocated by the Reformed churches did not need improvement. He was in no wise "amazingly tolerant" of the views of Smyth, Helwys and Murton related to the doctrines of grace; for when these truths were challenged, he could not keep silent.

Had Taylor read Robinson's parting words in context, he would have noticed that these remarks had to do with ecclesiology and the opportunity that faced them to implement their ideal (as they then understood it) in the New World. The Pilgrim pastor was no equivocator upon the doctrines of grace, and no doubt his views mediated through Brewster and Bradford are in part responsible for the ascendancy of Calvinism in Colonial America.

Robinson's Calvinism, as is seen in his writings, remains constant during an era of challenge to these doctrines. His writings along with those of Ainsworth demonstrate the commitment of early English Separatism to the doctrines of grace. With this as background, the radical shift in the soteriology of the General Baptists is clearly seen. It is the contention of this writer, which will be the subject of further research, that the turning point for the General Baptists was the rejection of infant baptism. Having rejected this practice, they were faced with the task of defending their new understanding of the church. Smyth found in the Waterlanders a system of theology which filled the need. Helwys, unable to agree with the Waterlanders on justification, original sin, etc., adopted a theology resembling that of the Remonstrants. Murton, who was younger than Smyth and Helwys, took a position which is a hybrid of his two pastors' soteriology.

John Robinson remains an example par excellence of a pastor-theologian. Both his pastoral and theological abilities contributed to the development of his legacy, the Pilgrim Fathers.