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ROBERT ROBINSON

A Pastor in Cambridge⁽¹⁾

In his lifetime a controversial figure, Robinson has remained controversial in the judgments of Baptist historians. Six years after Robinson's death in 1790, his associate, G. Dyer, (2) published his memoirs with an emphasis on the writings. A few years later B. Flower, (3) who also had known Robinson personally, wrote a short memoir in a publication of Robinson's miscellaneous works dissenting from a number of Dyer's judgments. Then William Robinson, (4) in an introduction to the select works of Robinson published in 1861, asserting that the productions of both Dyer and Flower were 'not satisfactory', used material from the Church book, as well as some private letters, to present a more balanced view of Robinson's life.

Meanwhile Bogue and Bennett, in their history of dissenters published in 1812, made the judgment that had Robinson 'retained the piety which he appeared to have; the humility and the zeal, the evangelical principles of his younger years, there would have been few more useful, as there were few more able, ministers in England'. (5) This is a reference to Robinson's change of doctrinal emphasis in his later years when, according to William Robinson 'he was one of the most decided Unitarians of his age'.

Whitley makes a similar point in his statement that 'two such different men as Isaac Watts and Robert Robinson were fascinated by the intellectual problem of the person of Christ and wrestled with that rather than with the practical problem of converting England'. (6) But Ivimey, who lived nearer Robinson's time, would not agree with that somewhat harsh judgment for, labelling Robinson 'a distinguished preacher and writer', he asserts that in his earlier years Robinson 'preached evangelically and had laboured incessantly to bring sinners to love and serve the Redeemer'. (7) But he goes on to assert that Robinson 'for some time before his death was evidently insane'. (8) Underwood makes the milder judgment that Robinson was 'rather eccentric'. (9) Graham Hughes is more positive: calling Robinson 'the Cambridge preacher, scholar, reformer and protagonist of Protestant Dissent' (10), he places much emphasis on Robinson's 'championship of liberty'.

Differing judgments then about a man who was said to be 'like a noble vessel broken from its moorings'. (11) Admitting the elements of truth in these judgments, I find an important aspect of Robinson's work largely overlooked; to me it is perhaps the most important aspect and I believe that Robinson, too, for much of his period of ministry would have given it the same significance. I refer to his work as pastor of the local church in Cambridge.

In order to present and substantiate my argument I quote much material from the church book which Robinson himself wrote. At a Church Meeting on 21st April 1774 he informed the church that 'the two books in which records were made were both decayed and defaced by the damp of the place in which they had been kept', so he had

purchased a new book, and had spent nine days examining the old books and other memoirs before writing seventy-seven pages covering the early years of his ministry. For some further years he continued to keep this record of the church's life.

He came to the small church in Cambridge with its four deacons and 34 members in 1759 for a trial period which lasted two years. His people frequently asked him to accept the pastoral office but he refused on account of his youth and inexperience. He wrote that 'as he was born in a family void of piety, and had been educated at Scarning school in Norfolk under the reverend Joseph Brett, a clergyman, for the ministry of the established church; as he had been unjustly deprived of his maternal fortune and exposed to the severest hardships, as he was first brought to a love of real religion by hearing the rev'd George Whitefield and had joined the Methodists; as he had for that reason been deserted and persecuted by his relations and left to extreme poverty, he supposed that his prejudices of birth, education and conversion might be too strong for his reason and his opportunities of informing himself too few, and that therefore should he precipitate his settlement he might adopt a plan which his maturer age might disapprove'.

This hesitation ended on Thursday 11th June 1761 and Robinson records the date with the significant words 'they conferred the pastoral office, the highest honour on earth, on that abandoned and outcast boy. (Great God, he records it with tears!)'. Across the years these words convey the deep emotion felt by Robinson in becoming pastor of the church just as they express the profound significance which he gave to the office. Robinson also admitted that his hesitation 'did violence to the affectations of a people who tenderly loved him, who multiplied very fast and in whom he found fathers, brethren, sisters, a love preferable to all that the world could afford'. And at the end of his ministry with its changes his people had a tablet placed in the chapel in Birmingham where he preached his last sermon. After the customary eulogy, the tablet bore the following words: 'The congregation of Stone Yard, Cambridge has caused this tablet to be erected as a testimony of grateful affection to their beloved pastor'.

So mutual affection existed between pastor and people during the years of Robinson's ministry. But his careful ordering of the life of his church shows the supremely important place which he gave to his work as pastor.

His congregation steadily increased so that the converted barn in which they worshipped - 'a damp, dark, cold, ruinous, contemptible hovel' Robinson called it - became too small and a number of men of large fortune who were regular attenders raised the £550 needed for a new building. Then Robinson made sure that the building would be well kept and worship would be orderly. They appointed the widow Morris to be 'a servant of the church for cleaning the meeting house, furniture, etc.' and they paid her £4.5s.6d. a year. Three people were appointed to sit in the two side aisles and in the gallery 'to accommodate strangers with suitable seats, to open pew doors for constant hearers, to prevent unmannerly children from running out

and in, in short to preserve a decent order, than which nothing is more beautiful in any place, nothing more desirable for the credit of religion at Cambridge where so many of the gown give such sad examples of rudeness'.

Robinson responded to the changing nature of his congregation by making the second service on Sundays different from the morning service which he regarded as the church's worship. In the evening he gave a lecture 'by desire of the town and gown' and he wrote that 'his aim in diversifying the manner of worship in lectures was the good of his hearers in general and the growth of the church in particular'. For this purpose he sometimes introduced 'a sprightly tune' and preached 'in another language and in another manner than he did in the church's worship'. There was some criticism but the church gave him 'entire liberty of conducting his lectures as he judged most conducive to the public edification'.

The careful thought behind these arrangements was shown especially in the administration of the Lord's supper and the detail with which Robinson describes it indicates the significance which he attached to it.

At the close of the worship some attenders left and some moved into the gallery as spectators: 'Mary Morris, the servant of the church, covered the table with a clean linen cloth and set thereon bread in a basket, two borrowed silver cups and three pints of red port wine. The pastor took his seat at the upper end of the table. The deacons next him, two on each hand. The elder men members at the table. The younger in the pews on the pastor's right hand. The women in pews at his left. The pastor began with a short discourse on the occasion, nature, benefits, etc. of this ordinance'.

'Then he read 1 Cor. 11. 23 till he came at the words "took bread" then taking the bread in his hand he read "and when he had given thanks" then the congregation rising, he gave thanks. This ended and the church sat down again... he broke bread during which he spoke of the sufferings of Christ. Then delivering the plates of bread to the deacons he said "Take eat...", the deacons then carried the bread round to the members during which the pastor and all the church sat silent. The deacons at their return took bread and ate; the pastor last of all because the servant of all. Then he took the cup and the congregation rising again he gave thanks. Then he poured the wine from the bottles into the cups, discoursing as while he broke the bread. He gave the deacons the cup saying "this cup..." after they returned and were seated they drank and last the pastor, all sitting silent. A hymn or psalm was then sung, after which a collection for the poor was made, the blessing added and the assembly dismissed. The whole time was about three quarters of an hour'.

Did Robinson find church life in Cambridge in so poor a state that he judged it necessary to develop and maintain these proper arrangements for the ordinance? His detailed description is surely an illustration of the careful thought which he gave to each aspect of his ministry.

Another illustration of this pastoral care is to be discerned in the election of deacons in 1777 when 'Mr. Whitby the deacon for the poor complained that the work belonging to the office was too great for the present three'. Robinson proposed that there should be seven deacons, that the eight oldest men members should each nominate one and that the members should choose four of the nominees by ballot to be added to the three surviving deacons. He sent a list of members to the eight and then interrogated them about their motives in making their nominations and about their complete privacy in the task. Then the members, both men and women, each had four pieces of paper to place in the baskets of their choice, 'as some could not read a little, [a] disinterested boy who could read waited in the vestry and told them whose each plate was'. When the four were elected Robinson prayed 'and laid his hands on the four deacons who were kneeling'. In the afternoon Robinson preached about the spirit needed in officers of the church, concluding 'with exhortations to the electors and to the elected'.

The deacons aided their pastor in matters of discipline, of which only a few cases are recorded. Does this suggest a harmonious and non-censorious fellowship? When a woman was accused of immoral conduct, two deacons investigated the matter and reported that the woman was innocent, so 'the pastor took the occasion to show the church the extreme danger of trifling with one another's characters'. Then there were two members who ceased to attend because they thought the church's doctrine corrupt. They set at nought all the pastor's counsel 'and would have none of his reproofs' but all the other members pondered his consolatory words 'and laid them up in their hearts'.

Another member, Joseph Hart, was evidently a trial! Robinson calls him 'an ignorant, sour, conceited antinomian whose whole religion was dispute'. But his parents were honourable members of the church so he was dealt with as patiently as possible. On another occasion Robinson had to deal with 'a scandalous affair'. So he interviewed two people in his vestry, appointing 'two ancient members of the church to be present with him'. The sin was admitted, penitence and reparation was offered and with the consent of the two elderly members the pastor judged it wise to keep the matter private.

These pastoral situations show Robinson dealing with people with both firmness and compassion, with both openness and discretion.

The growth of the church brought families into the fellowship and mention has already been made of children at morning worship. In 1761 the church was divided into 'classes' on the Methodist model and one class was for children which proved 'very beneficial to the church'. The children met the pastor every Thursday afternoon to say their catechism. In the villages which Robinson visited the children were catechised once a month before the preaching service. 'To carry on this mode of instruction with success it was necessary to give the catechism and bibles, testaments and hymn books, etc. to the children to allure or reward them. Several persons contributed to this expense but the contributions being unequal to the charge, the pastor supported it as long as he could and then was obliged to desist'.

In 1765 several young people asked Robinson for permission 'to form a society of young people to spend one hour in the vestry every Lord's day noon in religious exercises'. Robinson pointed out that such gatherings could be abused. Members could emphasize praying and singing, and ignore moral duties. Such meetings 'often cherished the vanity of hot headed men' and they tended to 'ground religion not on evidence and faith but on uncertain feelings'. So he drew up seven regulations for the proper ordering of the meetings and gave permission to the young people believing that such a meeting might be an excellent nursery for the church and productive of great good.

A special illustration of Robinson's pastoral care is provided by his dealings with James Bicheno who desired to enter the ministry. Bicheno had been cut off from the church in 1769 because of some misconduct but in 1774 he 'related his life since the exclusion, that he had been kidnapped into America and was there sold to a planter, that in extreme misery there he had seen the evil of his misconduct as he had expressed in a letter sent to the pastor from Virginia, that having been redeemed by his father he had returned to his country, his people and his first profession'. He was admitted to membership and Robinson examined him with a view to ministry as well as consulting other ministers who advised sending him to Bristol. Bicheno was allowed to exercise his gifts 'under the direction of the pastor and deacons'. Then in 1776 Robinson guided the church into a decision to recommend Bicheno to Bristol College 'retaining however his fellowship to this church that in case of misconduct he may be cut off'.

This account of Robinson as pastor of a local church may conclude by reference to the statements in the church book recording his death and the church's reactions. The church book speaks of 'the late excellent and most beloved pastor of this church'. It says that when 'the calamitous news of his death came to the church the event was too disastrous to the happiness of the church not to produce a great effect'. Then comes a significant sentence. 'The church however had enjoyed the advantages of Mr. Robinson's instructions too long and with too much profit to consent to give that time to unavailing sorrow which might be more profitably employed in providing for our future situation'. So a committee was appointed 'for the purpose of providing proper supplies and taking care of other necessary matters'.

On the basis of the evidence outlined in this article I make the judgment that though Robinson became a popular preacher in much demand, though he shared a number of controversies and upheld Dissenting principles of liberty, though he wrote numerous articles and books including the massive ecclesiastical researches and history of baptism which obsessed him in his later years, his most significant and enduring work was achieved as pastor of the local church. To win people to a response of faith in Christ, to enable them to grow into Christian stability and maturity, to develop and guide the life of the church so that it became a strong, well ordered Christian community continuing faithfully through many generations is a work of outstanding importance. Robinson had called the pastoral office the highest honour on earth. Through much of his ministry he fulfilled it worthily. Those are the terms in which his life and work should be evaluated.

NOTES

- 1 This article is based on the Church Book belonging to St Andrew's Street Church, Cambridge, which Robinson wrote and which I transcribed in the winter of 1983/84. I have quoted extensively from the book. It will be published by the Society as No.2 in its *English Baptist Records* series.
- 2 G. Dyer, *Memoirs of the life and writings of Robert Robinson*, London 1796.
- 3 B. Flower, 'Memoir of R. Robinson' in *Robinson's Miscellaneous Works*, vol.1, London 1807
- 4 William Robinson, 'Memoir' in *R. Robinson: Select Works*, London 1861
- 5 Bogue & Bennett, *History of the Dissenters*, vol.IV, p.474.
- 6 W. T. Whitley, *History of the British Baptists*, revised edition 1932, p.214.
- 7 J. Ivimey, *History of the English Baptists*, vol.IV, 1830, p.452.
- 8 *ibid.* p.457
- 9 A. C. Underwood, *History of the English Baptists*, 1947, p.139
- 10 G. Hughes, *With Freedom Fired*, London 1955, preface.
- 11 William Robinson, as cited by Underwood, *op.cit.*, p.139.

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REVIEW

Pastors and People: The Biography of a Baptist Church, Queen's Road, Coventry by Clyde Binfield, published by Queen's Road Baptist Church, Coventry, 1984.

I must begin by declaring a bias in favour of this book. From my childhood days the Queen's Road buildings were familiar to me, for a large photograph of them, taken at the turn of the century, hung upon the wall of my parents' bedroom. It was a presentation to my father who had been one of the earliest student assistants from Bristol to work for a year in Queen's Road with W. E. Blomfield. Indeed, it was amongst my father's papers that I discovered the document referred to on page 114 of Dr Binfield's book, describing a Plan of Church Work set by Blomfield for my father. Then again, two of my predecessors as Principal of the Baptist College in Bristol had been ministers at Queen's Road, namely W. J. Henderson and Arthur Dakin. Two of its more recent ministers, Gordon Hastings and Richard Hamper, were fellow students with me in College at Oxford and I remember with real affection Townley Lord and Ingli James, both of whom were very good to me at the beginning of my own ministry. On a number of occasions I have preached in Queen's Road, and have known something of its more recent life. So it was that I came to this book with great anticipation. On the whole, that anticipation was rewarded.