

Transcriber's Preface to Slavery Inconsistent with the Spirit of Christianity: An 18th Century Baptist Advocates Freedom

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A Biographical Sketch of Robert Robinson

Robert Robinson (1735-1790) was a Particular Baptist leader of prominence in 18th century England. Despite a rough childhood, he was able to garner a modest education by the strength and resolve of his mother. Robinson's father was quite self absorbed, and deserted him, his mother, and two siblings when Robert was a child. Though Mary Robinson worked hard to provide for her family, she apprenticed her daughter to a dressmaker and eldest son to a painter.¹ However, she sent young Robert to grammar school. His penchant for languages and giftedness in his studies won him the respect of his clergyman teacher, Joseph Brett, who, when tuition became too burdensome for Mary, offered to cover the expenses. At fourteen Robinson was reluctantly pulled from school and apprenticed to a barber in London. His mother's dream of seeing him into the clergy started to vanish along with her ability to sustain them through her needlework.²

His desire for learning did not diminish in London, however, as his master and others recognized his unusual gifting in scholarship.³ He soon made it a practice to attend sermons of evangelical and dissenting ministers, and even referred to George Whitefield as a spiritual mentor.⁴ His professed dedication to the religious life came in 1752, but after three years

¹Graham W. Hughes, *With Freedom Fired: The Story of Robert Robinson, Cambridge Nonconformist* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press Limited, 1955), 8.

²*Ibid.*, 9.

³*Ibid.*, 10.

⁴John Stephens, "Robert Robinson," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007).

of listening to Whitefield's sermons, he was converted in 1755.⁵ Upon release of his apprenticeship in 1758 he made his home in Mildenhall and joined up with a group of Methodists.⁶ Once his peers sensed his abilities, they begged him to preach at their meetings, and he eventually agreed.⁷ He later accepted the call to the pastorate of the Methodist Tabernacle in Norwich. Though starting as a Methodist, he and thirteen others soon broke away from the group to form an Independent church. He drew up a confession of faith, fully congregational, and Calvinist.⁸ A short time later, he set out to determine the New Testament's proper position on baptism. In 1759, convinced of the New Testament's explicit teaching of believer's baptism by immersion, he left the practice of infant baptism and was baptized by a Baptist minister. In the same year he was called to the Stoneyard Baptist Chapel in Cambridge, accepting the pastoral office in 1761. John Gill's recommendation played a large part in securing the young Robinson for the pastorate in this dying church.⁹ Robinson's preaching revived the small church.

The resolve of the young pastor toward regenerate church membership played a significant role in the revival of the congregation at Stoneyard. In his words,

The church declined both in doctrine and practice. Her articles of faith were explained away, and evaporated under a pretence of being refined. Her experience was enthusiastic, and her conduct grossly immoral. Some were cut off; some returned to the world as the dog to his vomit; and the few pious souls that remained were covered with confusion at seeing their best people withdraw to other churches.¹⁰

Graham Hughes, in his biography of Robinson, recounts the reason for the church's rapid revitalization:

His strong hand was felt, discipline was enforced, errors were corrected, sins against the fellowship were curbed, unworthy members were dismissed and great caution was observed in admitting new applicants into membership. The church early discovered what strict views were held by their minister on the

⁵Raymond Brown, *The English Baptists of the 18th Century* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1986), 81.

⁶Hughes, *With Freedom Fired*, 13.

⁷Ibid., 14.

⁸Ibid., 15.

⁹Ibid., 16.

¹⁰Ibid., 18.

subject of discipline, order and the purity of the Church. As frequently happens when high standards are enforced, far from declining the church began to grow in strength and began to manifest spiritual progress.¹¹

Hughes also attributes Robinson's bold and stalwart stance on church discipline with the salvation of the reputation of dissenting ministers in Cambridge.¹² Robinson further set out to catechize members of his church, recognizing the catechism of new members to be essential to church discipline.¹³

Robinson preached in Cambridge on Sundays and the neighboring villages during the week, "often preaching at five in the morning and half-past six in the evening to several hundreds who gathered" to hear him.¹⁴ He was popular in the academy, and took part in ventures to establish educational institutions, relief for poor dissenting ministers and education for their children. He wrote *A Plan of Lectures on the Principles of Nonconformity* as instruction to the young concerning "the principles of non-conformity," heavily emphasizing religious liberty.¹⁵ Realizing a need for educated ministers, though many Baptists were "prejudiced against the learned ministry" in this period, he unsuccessfully attempted to open a theological academy at Cambridge.¹⁶

He openly opposed his country's taxation policy of the American colonies, and was active in petitions and demonstrations in this regard. His political views caused strife among some members of his church, and he received calls for resignation. The *Plan of Lectures* "provoked adverse comment in Parliament," and was attributed with teaching the young minister's denial of the establishment in general.¹⁷ The antagonistic provocation was likely fueled by Robinson's sympathy toward both the American colonies' dissent and the French Revolution.

In 1781 he was commissioned by London Baptists to write a history of Baptists, and though the project was abandoned for a time, it was finally published in 1790. In this work, he undertook the massive task of chronicling the history of believer's baptism from the beginning of Christian history.¹⁸ His plan was to produce a four-volume set, with one volume

¹¹Ibid., 19.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 31.

¹⁴Brown, *English Baptists of the 18th Century*, 123.

¹⁵Ibid., 3.; Robert Robinson, *A Plan of Lectures on the Principles of Nonconformity: For the Instruction of Catechumens* (Cambridge: Francis Hodson, 1778).

¹⁶Brown, *English Baptists of the 18th Century*, 124.

¹⁷Ibid., 133.

¹⁸Hughes, *With Freedom Fired*, 64.

chronicling the history of baptism, and the other three the history of Baptists beginning with the apostolic churches.¹⁹ He died before its completion, however, which was carried through to publication by William Frend two years later.²⁰

Regarding the nature of Christ, in 1776 he published *A Plea for the Divinity of Our Lord*, which refused to begin with the Athanasian Creed.²¹ He found great discomfort in theological systems, even the most basic. He wanted everyone to read the Bible for himself and continually question why things were previously proclaimed. His Baptist views stemmed from his high view of individual conscience, and that infant baptism is the suppression of one's right to this intrinsic characteristic. This view also shaped his opposition to the Thirty-Nine Articles and his belief that the foundation of the Reformation was on "private judgment."²²

Hughes weds Robinson to the "Rational Dissenters"—a group of theologians who embraced rationalism and tended toward liberal theology.²³ Robinson was deeply studious of the work of both Milton and Locke, which undoubtedly spurred his interest in government as well as natural law.²⁴ At this time, many dissenters were involved in public political reform and openly supported the American colonies' bid for independence. Hughes states about Robinson's stance, "He regarded their rebellion as a stroke in the *sacred cause of liberty*" (emphasis mine).²⁵ Indeed, Robinson's love of history and natural law greatly influenced and changed his theology. He viewed history as the outworking of God's will to be observed and interpreted as such.²⁶

Along with the Rational Dissenters he believed natural law dictated God's intention for man to be diverse, free and thinking.²⁷ Such a method led a number of other dissenters into the heresies of Socinianism and Arianism. Though the apparent heretical tendency in Robinson during this period is debated, he appears to indicate some movement toward the same rationalism that undermined the General Baptists.²⁸ In chronicling his namesake's writings, William Robinson laments that later in life, Robert

¹⁹Ibid., 65.

²⁰Robert Robinson, *The History of Baptism* (London: Thomas and Knott, 1790).

²¹Robert Robinson, *A Plea for the Divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ: In a Pastoral Letter Addressed to a Congregation of Protestant Dissenters, at Cambridge* (Cambridge: Fletcher and Hodson, 1776).

²²Stephens, "Robert Robinson."

²³Hughes, *With Freedom Fired*, 88.

²⁴Ibid., 90.

²⁵Ibid., 92.

²⁶Ibid., 94.

²⁷Ibid., 97.

²⁸Ibid., 101.

Robinson may have become “one of the most decided Unitarians of the age.”²⁹ He continues:

A marked and mournful change seems to have passed upon him soon after the year 1780. No man has the right to call him either Socinian or Arian. He held apparently the indwelling hypothesis to the end of his life, but became vague and confused in its application. He was like a noble vessel broken from its moorings, and drifting out to sea amidst fogs and rocks, without a compass or a rudder.

Robinson was an extraordinary individual in regards to his work ethic, intellectual abilities and preaching prowess. He worked outside of the pastorate, often regarding vocational ministers who do nothing but study as lazy, denouncing their idleness and even referring to them on occasion as “godly boobies.”³⁰ He spoke highly of his wife and twelve children, though the death of his favorite daughter, Julia, at seventeen years of age caused him inconsolable despair for a lengthy period of time.³¹ Overwork and little rest probably contributed to his death. And even though his counsel to young pastors often included the admonition to rest in order to live long on the earth, his personality was such that he could not heed his own advice when it came to his passionate study.

Robinson on Freedom

From 1770 to 1773, dissenting ministers greatly supported the efforts to repeal the Test and Corporations Act, and questioned their forced support of thirty-five of the Thirty-Nine Articles.³² Robinson quickly saw the real issue among the debates as one of religious liberty, and expressed this sentiment in his book *Arcana*.³³ Robert Hall stated, “The religious opinions of the Dissenters are so various that there is, perhaps, no point on which they are agreed, except in asserting the rights of conscience against all human control and authority.”³⁴ Robinson, perhaps more than all others of the time was highly devoted to the cause of freedom.³⁵ On freedom both for and within the church, Hughes states, “He believed that of all mankind

²⁹William Robinson, *Select Works of the Rev. Robert Robinson of Cambridge* (London: Heaton & Son, 1861), lxxvii.

³⁰Hughes, *With Freedom Fired*, 62.

³¹*Ibid.*, 64.

³²*Ibid.*, 42.

³³*Ibid.*, 43.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 44.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 45; Stephens, “Robert Robinson.”

it was the Dissenters who best understood and most frequently practiced that liberty.”³⁶ Indeed, it was from this sense of liberty that he ardently defended the practice of open communion and rejected the Particular Baptist Fund’s exclusive stipulation that the receiving persons be Calvinist.³⁷ Writing to Dan Taylor, Robinson asserted, “I hate dominion over conscience, because I am clearly convinced it dishonours God, degrades man, tacitly denies the perfection of the Divine word, dethrones the King of saints, and introduces all manner of wicked passions among Christians.”³⁸

A group of Anglican ministers along with Robinson pushed for a repeal of the need to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles along with an amendment to the Toleration Act on the basis of freedom of conscience.³⁹ He was focused upon political matters, even publishing a *Political Catechism*, in which he expressed opinions on a host of political and government topics.⁴⁰ His name became notorious on the floor of the House of Commons, however, as his name was called out for contributing to an anti-establishment agenda. But in 1828, upon repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, several years after the subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles was finally replaced with a general belief in the Scriptures, Congregational minister Sylvester Horne stated, “In this campaign no single individual, not even Dr. Joseph Priestly himself, did more valiant service than the eloquent and impassioned Baptist minister, Robert Robinson.”⁴¹

It is of little doubt that Robinson, especially in his formative years, was heavily influenced by George Whitefield. In the first three years of listening to the great evangelist, he likely heard Whitefield’s denouncement of the abuse by slave holders and their reluctance to support evangelistic efforts directed at the slaves themselves.⁴² While preaching in the colonies, Whitefield presented slave holders with an ultimatum: “repent or face divine judgment.”⁴³ Yet, even though Whitefield was critical of the slaveholders’ neglect of the spiritual welfare of the slaves, he did not denounce the industry itself.⁴⁴ While Baptist sentiments against the slave trade and the practice of owning slaves existed in various churches and associations in America, such as those in Virginia and Kentucky, debate never rose

³⁶Hughes, *With Freedom Fired*, 51.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 57.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 86.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁰Robert Robinson, *A Political Catechism* (London: Buckland et al, 1782).

⁴¹Hughes, *With Freedom Fired*, 48.

⁴²James D. Essig, *The Bonds of Wickedness: American Evangelicals Against Slavery, 1770-1808* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 10.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 14.

above the associational level.⁴⁵ Due to its autonomous structure without a national body of enforcement, overall Baptist sentiments toward slavery did not change.⁴⁶

Opposition to the Slave Trade

The General Assembly of General Baptists was among the first of the English Baptist denominations to unite in their support of the abolition movement. In 1787 they sent representatives, including the New Connexion's Dan Taylor, to voice support to the Committee for Abolition on behalf of all General Baptists.⁴⁷ In 1790, after a series of tavern meetings, the Cambridge Constitutional Society came to fruition. From this society, the first anti-slave trade petition, drawn up by the Particular Baptist Robinson, was sent to the House of Commons.⁴⁸

Many Baptist ministers, especially those from the Bristol Academy, openly resented the slave trade perpetrated by their own country. Raymond Brown states, "British slave traders had transported about a million and a half Africans during the eighteenth century. The sugar trade of the West Indies had relied on slavery and by 1790 about 70 million [pounds] of British money had been invested in the business."⁴⁹ Slaves brought to the Americas were traded for tea and sugar.⁵⁰ John Wesley protested against the industry, and many following him refused to use sugar for their tea.⁵¹ William Carey, in his famous *Enquiry*, suggested the money usually used to purchase sugar could be instead given to support overseas missions.⁵²

In the colonies of America, the British did not impose slave codes to govern master-slave relations.⁵³ Since Parliament declined to erect a code, the colonies were left to formulate their own. Executive and legislative powers in the colonies fell squarely on the slave-owning class, and laws, therefore, were not favorable to those sympathetic to the humanity of the slaves.

⁴⁵Lester B. Scherer, *Slavery and the Churches in Early America, 1619–1819* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 135.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 137.

⁴⁷Brown, *English Baptists of the 18th Century*, 102.

⁴⁸Hughes, *With Freedom Fired*, 49.

⁴⁹Brown, *English Baptists of the 18th Century*, 102.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 122.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 102.

⁵²William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, To Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (reprint, Didcot, Great Britain: Baptist Missionary Society, 1991), 111.

⁵³Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 312.

But the slave trade manifested itself in the owning and trading of slaves in Britain as well.⁵⁴ Liverpool and Bristol, both significantly populated by Baptists, were centers of the slave trade. Therefore, the English Baptists would have been acutely aware of the cruelty of slave transit between Africa and the Americas. In Bristol, a port where there was common observance of the trade and its frequency, Caleb Evans was outspoken against it.⁵⁵ Being the principal of the Bristol Academy, his influence became widespread.

Particular Baptist associations also began participating in the campaign for the abolition of the slave trade.⁵⁶ In 1792, the Northamptonshire Associational meeting of the Particular Baptists discussed the need for abolition of the slave trade.⁵⁷ This association's ministers and others along with them urged their peers of the importance and need of identifying with Wilberforce's abolition campaign. The Yorkshire and Lancashire Association's churches also decried the trade.⁵⁸ Bristol-trained James Dore of the Maize Pond church preached and published a sermon against the slave trade entitled *On the African Slave Trade* in 1788. Bristol-trained Jacob Grigg and James Rodway went to Sierra Leone to preach against the trade, and Grigg was later expelled for his opposition. Inter-denominational cooperation resulted from joint resolve against the slave trade, including that of Baptists, Anglicans, and Quakers.⁵⁹

Though their American cousins began the first protests against the slave trade, Britain moved more quickly to enact laws. English Quakers and Dissenters formed the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787.⁶⁰ Cambridge-trained Robert Clarkson crossed the country tens of thousands of miles on horseback mobilizing public opinion against slavery.⁶¹ William Wilberforce used Clarkson's petitions in his anti-slavery efforts in the House of Commons. In 1807, the House of Commons finally passed a bill abolishing the slave trade throughout the British colonies.⁶² Certainly it was those men who stood on biblical principles of liberty that ended the slave trade in Britain. It was in this environment that Robinson delivered the following sermon at Cambridge in 1788.

⁵⁴Brown, *English Baptists of the 18th Century*, 102.

⁵⁵Ibid., 122.

⁵⁶Ibid., 118.

⁵⁷Ibid., 121.

⁵⁸Ibid., 165.

⁵⁹Ibid., 136.

⁶⁰Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 349.

⁶¹Ibid., 350.

⁶²Ibid.

The Sermon of 1788

Robinson's sermon is addressed to the slave, the master, and the master and slave together. Appeals to liberty and freedom, the opposition between just versus the unjust, and the inherent cruelty and depravity of the slave trade prevail in the sermon. Though most of the sermon is directed toward the African slave trade, Robinson makes clear in his Appendix that:

This discourse, which attempts to shew that slavery is inconsistent with the genius of the Christian religion, was composed less for the purpose of exposing the iniquity of the African slave trade, than for that of vindicating the character of the primitive Christians, or rather the credit of Christianity itself, which is grossly misrepresented when it is described as compatible with slavery. Slavery in every form is unjust and inhuman: but a Christian religion in coalition with slavery is a mere creature of fancy.

The text of this sermon is republished for the modern reader in order to show that Baptists and other free churchmen have, at their best, maintained a proper doctrine of man, higher than the anthropologies characteristic of Roman Catholicism and evangelicalism, but lower than that of liberalism.⁶³ Robinson ably defends Christianity against its perversions, meanwhile displaying a subtle knowledge of classical history, Christian history, and international law. Although he attempts to find a way for Great Britain to outlaw slavery without too great of an economic disruption, his ultimate concern is to promote justice and remove national hypocrisy. For Robinson, the ethical tragedy of slavery has introduced a downward spiral in morality that ultimately concludes in atheism. Rather than this, he says in his sermon, "Let our actions be just, open, manly, conformable to our own convictions, such as become free intelligent and immortal men. . . . Above all, let us copy the life of Jesus, and *If the Son make us free, we shall be free indeed.*"

For Robinson, "liberty was the burning passion of his soul."⁶⁴ Though his theology went adrift in the latter part of his life, and consequently his joy for the faith, he maintained a nonconformist, Baptist identity in the championing of freedoms: thought, worship, religion, etc. It is virtually impossible to rightly consider the passion and rationale of this sermon outside the knowledge of Robinson's legacy. The intersection of reason and

⁶³Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 169-70, 195-203.

⁶⁴Hughes, *With Freedom Fired*, 116.

biblical principles colored Robinson's pursuits, and he can rightly be considered a participant in the rationalistic thought of the age. Yet even when rationalism staked far more ground in his theology than it should have, sound biblical and nonconformist principles still pervaded his writing.