



Searching for the Promised Land: The Travels and Travails of Richard Clyfton

By Peggy M. Baker

The English Separatist congregation that became the core of the Pilgrim movement had two pastors. Neither saw the "promised land" of Plymouth Colony.

The second pastor, John Robinson, was with the congregation (although not yet pastor) when they moved from England to Holland in search of religious freedom. He was a strong proponent of the group's later move from Holland to America, where they would reestablish their church in the new Plymouth Colony. When it was determined that only a minority of his congregation would voyage on the *Mayflower*, however, Robinson remained behind in Holland. He intended to make the Atlantic crossing with the rest of his flock as soon as it was financially possible. It was not to be. Robinson died in 1624 in Leiden, never having seen Plymouth Colony.

John Robinson did, however, rejoice from afar in the founding of Plymouth. And, even though they were separated by the Atlantic Ocean, Robinson in Leiden and that portion of his flock that had emigrated to Plymouth remained connected. The colonists continued to regard Robinson as their spiritual leader. His advice was sought - and received - by letter. Robinson's wisdom and flexibility, as reflected in the character of early Plymouth Colony, are widely regarded as significant elements in the Colony's survival.

Robinson's predecessor as pastor of the Pilgrim group is often overlooked. John Robinson was not, in fact, the founder of the original congregation. Instead, he joined a congregation that was already gathered around Richard Clyfton.

William Bradford describes how the Separatists in the area of England known today as "Pilgrim Country" (Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire) formed themselves into two distinct churches. One was the church gathered at Gainsborough in Lincolnshire (John Smyth became their pastor). The other was the church gathered first at Babworth and then at Scrooby in Nottinghamshire, about ten miles from Gainsborough. This Babworth/Scrooby congregation (which would eventually become the Pilgrim church) was under the leadership of Richard Clyfton.

"In one of these churches [Gainsborough]... was Mr. John Smith, a man of able gifts and a good preacher, who afterwards was chosen their pastor. But these afterwards falling into some errors in the Low Countries [The Netherlands], there (for the most part) buried themselves and their names. But in this other church [Babworth/Scrooby]...besides other worthy men, was Mr. Richard Clyfton, a grave and reverend preacher, who by his pains and diligence had done much good, and under God had been a means of the conversion of many. And also that famous and worthy man Mr. John Robinson, who afterwards was their pastor for many years, till the Lord took him away by death. Also Mr. William Brewster..."

It was the preaching of Richard Clyfton and the inspiration he provided to William Brewster and William Bradford that launched the "Pilgrim adventure."

Richard Clyfton was born around 1553 near the Nottinghamshire village of Babworth but left to attend Cambridge University, a hotbed of dissenting theology. He returned home an ordained minister in 1586 and was named pastor of Babworth's All Saints Church. His position as pastor

provided Clyfton with a "living" and he was now able to marry. He and his wife Anne had three sons and three daughters, all born at Babworth. The three daughters died in infancy or childhood, but the three Clyfton sons survived.

Sometime in the 1590s, Clyfton began to preach dissenting religious views and to conduct services using prayers that were not in the officially authorized Book of Prayers. He soon drew an audience from the surrounding towns and villages. William Brewster, living six or seven miles away in Scrooby, heard Clyfton preach. Brewster joined Clyfton's Babworth congregation, walking by paths through the fields to attend services every Sunday morning and returning by foot to Scrooby late every Sunday afternoon. Several years later, around 1602, young William Bradford, who was living in Austerfield (a Yorkshire village some ten miles from Babworth), also, according to Cotton Mather "came to enjoy Mr. Richard Clifton's illuminating ministry." The path from William Bradford's home in Austerfield to Richard Clyfton's church in Babworth went by William Brewster's home in Scrooby. The two men - Bradford a lonely and intellectual teenager and Brewster a settled older family man - walked together and undoubtedly learned each other's minds and characters.



The Church of All Saints in Babworth still stands and the path on which William Brewster and William Bradford walked to attend services at the church is still open to pedestrians.



The Medieval windows at Babworth witnessed the preaching of Richard Clyfton. The church remained Church of England and still maintains many of the decorative elements that were not congenial to Clyfton and other English Puritans.

Eventually, Clyfton's preaching and his Puritan methods of conducting his services (among other issues, he refused to wear vestments or use the sign of Cross at Baptism, as mandated by the official English church) came to the attention of the authorities. He was accused before the Chancery Court of being a "nonconformist and nonsubscriber." In 1605, he was deprived of his position at Babworth.

It was at this point that the fledgling congregation began to meet at Scrooby Manor, the home of William Brewster. In 1606, the group that gathered there agreed to officially form themselves into an independent (and illegal) Separatist congregation. The congregation, in the manner of all Separatist communities, named their own officers. Richard Clyfton was chosen as pastor and William Brewster was chosen as elder. (John Robinson, who may not have joined the group until 1607, was then chosen as teacher.)



Part of William Brewster's home, Scrooby Manor, still exists today

Simultaneously, another group of like-minded religious dissidents was gathering in Gainsborough, some ten miles from Scrooby Manor. They met in Gainsborough Old Hall, a manor house owned by Puritan William Hickman. This congregation's chosen leader was John Smyth.

Like Clyfton (although about 20 years younger), Smyth was an ordained minister and graduate of Cambridge University. He had been appointed preacher of the city of Lincoln in 1600 but lost the position soon thereafter because of his unorthodox views. By 1606, his opinions had evolved until he and his Gainsborough congregation were - like the congregation at Scrooby - believers in religious Separatism.



Gainsborough Old Hall is one of the best preserved medieval mansions in England, particularly noted for its Great Hall and extensive kitchens. In the century before it sheltered a group of religious Separatists, it was briefly the home of Katherine Parr and her first husband (Katherine later became the last wife of King Henry VIII).

Even though both the Gainsborough group and the Scrooby group were "Separatist," their views were not entirely and necessarily the same. The full details of their differences are not known but, in 1610, Richard Clyfton published a book in which he wrote that a "conference concerning excommunication and other differences then between you [Smyth] and me [Clyfton] was held." The two churches were, however, closely related in their beliefs and, as secret and persecuted groups, they shared many common interests.

Both groups were pursued in court for disobeying English laws that mandated religious conformity. William Brewster was forced to resign from his position as Postmaster and a warrant was issued requiring him to appear in Court. A significant fine was levied when he did not appear. Others were imprisoned under inhumane conditions. William Bradford charged that the authorities were

"allowing them neither meat, drink, fire or lodging, nor suffering any whose hearts the Lord would stir up for their relief, to have any access to them."

In 1607, both groups - Gainsborough and Scrooby - decided to flee to Holland, where they hoped and expected to find (in William Bradford's words) "freedom of religion for all men". Their specific goal was the large and prosperous Dutch city of Amsterdam, a city that already harbored large populations of

Leaving England was not easy. Unable to obtain official permission to emigrate, the Separatists fled as best they could. Some of the group was captured and jailed, only to attempt to flee again. Eventually, as Bradford wrote,

"notwithstanding all these storms of opposition, they all gat over at length, some at one time and some at another, and some in one place and some in another, and met together again according to their desires, with no small rejoicing."

by late summer of 1608, the two Separatist congregations - Gainsborough, led by John Smyth, and Scrooby, led by Richard Clyfton - were settled in Amsterdam.

In Amsterdam, the newly arrived Separatists were greeted by a congregation of English dissenters that had been living and worshipping in Amsterdam for over 10 years. This group, the earliest to arrive in Amsterdam, was officially titled the "Brethren of the Separation of the First English Church at Amsterdam." They were known, informally, as the "Ancient Brethren."

The Ancient Brethren were a relatively calm and united group in 1608. This had NOT always been the case. Several years before the arrival of the Scrooby group, the leader of the Ancient Brethren had excommunicated his own father and brother for criticizing his (the leader's) wife.

The excommunicating leader of the Ancient Brethren was Francis Johnson. He was (like Clyfton and Smyth) a Cambridge-educated minister. Johnson had first moved to Holland in 1590 to serve as pastor of an English-speaking church in Middelburg. Although a strong believer in reform, Johnson adamantly opposed Separatism; he had even confiscated some Separatist books and was about to burn them. His intellectual curiosity, however, led him to read the books first. Johnson reconsidered his beliefs, left his non-Separating Middelburg congregation and returned to London where he formed a Separatist church.

These were perilous times for religious dissidents. In 1593, Francis Johnson and about 50 of his London congregation were put in prison for their religious views. Two other radical reforming Separatists, Henry Barrow and John Greenwood (authors of the books that had originally "converted" Francis Johnson), were hung at Tyburn.

Johnson's congregation – but not Johnson himself - was gradually freed from jail. They began to migrate to Amsterdam where, leaderless, they struggled to remain a community. It was not until 1597 that Francis Johnson was able to join them. The Amsterdam group was also joined by yet another charismatic Separatist, Henry Ainsworth, who would become their teacher.

Once the community was established, it grew in number to, perhaps, 300. This is all the more remarkable because, unlike the (official) English Reformed Church that received both financial support and the use of church buildings from the Dutch government, the Separatist communities had to pay their own way and were, on occasion, harassed by officials of the Dutch Reformed Church.

By 1607, the Ancient Brethren were finally of a size and economic stability that its members could finance the construction of a new church in which the congregation would worship.

It was to this congregation that the Scrooby and Gainsborough Separatists would have turned when they arrived in Amsterdam in 1608. The newly arrived Separatists did not officially join the Ancient

Brethren; each of the three congregations (Gainsborough, Scrooby and Ancient Brethren) maintained their independence. They did, however, worship peacefully together in the new church building - for a very short while.

The unity among the congregations was broken by John Smyth of Gainsborough. A gentleman of questioning disposition and constantly evolving religious views, he was described by Henry Ainsworth as having published

"three sundry books wherein he hath shewed himselfe of 3 several [different] religions."

Smyth was characterized by William Bradford, in his *First Dialogue*, as

"an eminent man in his time, and a good preacher, and of other good parts; but his inconstancy, and unstable judgment, and being so suddenly carried away with things, did soon overthrow him."

Bradford continues

"He [John Smyth] was some time pastor to a company of honest and godly men which came with him out of England, and pitched at Amsterdam. He first fell into some errors about the Scriptures, and so into some opposition with Mr. Johnson, who had been his tutor, and the church there."

The "errors about the Scriptures" into which Smyth fell were several.

Smyth's first notion was that it was sinful to use printed English Bibles in church services, translations being the work of man and not God. He insisted that the Bibles used should be in the original Hebrew and Greek and translated on the spot. This denial of translated works extended to Psalters. Consequently, Smyth's congregation could no longer delight in the usual Separatist "harmonious singing of the Psalms of Holy Scripture."

Smyth also disagreed with the Ancient Brethren (and with the Scrooby Separatists) about baptism. His issues here were twofold. First, he decided that infant or childhood baptism was inherently defective because children cannot truly believe and confess their faith. Second, he decided that since the Church of England was not a true and "purified" church, none of its baptisms were effective. In Smyth's view, the only solution was for believers to be rebaptized (this belief is known as Anabaptism).

When Smyth proposed this radical departure from the Scrooby Separatists' beliefs, Richard Clyfton was galvanized into action.

He and John Smyth engaged in a length debate about infant baptism and rebaptism. Smyth put his beliefs into writing in early 1609. Clyfton responded in writing, laying out his belief (a belief shared both by the Ancient Brethren and the Scrooby Separatists) that children whose parents or guardian were in church membership should be baptized and that rebaptism of those baptized by "erroneous churches" was scripturally unsound. In March of 1609, Smyth responded to Clyfton's rebuttal. Accusations of "heresy" flew. Clyfton began to respond once more but, before he could, Smyth had published their previous correspondence. Eventually, Clyfton published a book entitled *The plea for infants and elder people* (Amsterdam, 1610).

Long before this, Smyth and those of his Gainsborough congregation who had followed him through his doctrinal evolutions had formed a new church in Amsterdam, distinct and separate from the Ancient Brethren. John Robinson wrote

"Mr Smith, Mr Helwys and the rest, having utterly dissolved, and disclaimed their former Church state and ministry came together to erect a new Church by baptism; unto which they also ascribed so great virtue, as that they would not so much as pray together before they had it."

While Richard Clyfton was battling away with John Smyth, the rest of his Scrooby congregation was becoming increasingly disenchanted with the controversies and disruptions. They quietly reformed around John Robinson, their more tranquil teacher and minister. As described by William Bradford

"And when they had lived at Amsterdam about a year, Mr. Robinson their pastor and some others of best discerning, seeing how Mr. John Smith and his company was already fallen into contention with the church that was there before them [the Ancient Brethren], and no

means they could use would do any good to cure the same, and also that the flames of contention were like to break out in that ancient church itself (as afterwards lamentably came to pass); which things they prudently foreseeing thought it was best to remove [from Amsterdam] before they were any way engaged with the same."

Robinson and the more peaceful elements of the Scrooby group began to look for another place to live. It may have been William Brewster, who had visited The Netherlands in the 1580s, who suggested the Dutch city of Leiden. In February of 1609, Robinson asked the Leiden City Council for permission to move to that city. He described his group as

"members of the Christian Reformed Religion, born in the Kingdom of Great Britain, to the number of one hundred persons or thereabouts, men and women."

The answer came back

"The Court... declare that they refuse no honest persons ingress to come and have their residence in this city, provided that such persons behave themselves honestly, and submit to all the laws and ordinances here."

On May 1, 1609, John Robinson and most of the Scrooby congregation arrived in Leiden. Richard Clyfton was not with them. He remained behind in Amsterdam and joined with the Ancient Brethren (led by Francis Johnson with Henry Ainsworth as teacher). As William Bradford describes in his *First Dialogue*

"Mr. Richard Clifton was a good and fatherly old man when he came first into Holland, having a great white beard; and pity it was that such a reverend old man should be forced to leave his country, and at those years to go into exile. But it was his lot, and he bore it patiently. Much good had he done in the country where he lived, and converted many to God by his faithful and painful ministry, both in preaching and catechising. Sound and orthodox he always was, and so continued to his end. He belonged to the church at Leyden; but being settled at Amsterdam and then aged, he was loath to remove any more; and so when they removed he was dismissed to them there, and there remained [in Amsterdam] until he died."

Before Clyfton's death, however, he and the Ancient Brethren and the Scrooby Separatists (now living in Leiden and led by John Robinson) met once more.

In 1610, the Ancient Brethren were split over the proper interpretation of a passage from the New Testament - "And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the Church" (Matthew 18:18) - that spoke to where authority lay within the church.

Richard Clyfton and the Brethren's pastor, Francis Johnson, said the "Church" meant only the Elders and Officers of the Church. The Brethren's teacher, Henry Ainsworth (and thirty other members of the congregation), said that the "Church" meant all the members of the congregation. The problem was not theoretical. One of the church's deacons had been accused of gross impropriety and Francis Johnson did not wish to bring the matter before the entire congregation.

Unable to reach agreement, Henry Ainsworth (with the acquiescence if not the active participation of Francis Johnson) invited John Robinson and William Brewster to return to Amsterdam from Leiden to mediate the dispute.

Robinson and Brewster agreed with the interpretation of Henry Ainsworth but praised the supporters of Francis Johnson among the Ancient Brethren for their calm and considered approach. Christopher Lawne, who was at the meetings, quoted John Robinson as saying

"That he had rather walk in peace with five godly persons, than to live with five hundred or five thousand such unquiet persons as these [the followers of Henry Ainsworth] were."

Neither group was pleased with this result. Robinson and Brewster returned to Leiden and the battle in Amsterdam broke out again.

There followed bitter disagreements, invective and excommunications. In December of 1610, the groups supporting Francis Johnson and Henry Ainsworth split, causing a permanent division in the Ancient Brethren. The main part – including Richard Clyfton - remained with Johnson and kept the name "Ancient Brethren." A small group of 30 or so formed a separate congregation under the leadership of Henry Ainsworth.

Bradford, in his *First Dialogue*, makes it clear that his theological sympathies were with Ainsworth, writing that

"Mr Henry Ainsworth, a man of a thousand, was teacher of this church at Amsterdam at the same time when Mr. [Francis] Johnson was pastor. Two worthy men they were and of excellent parts. He [Henry Ainsworth] continued constant in his judgment and practice unto his end in those things about the church government, from which Mr. Johnson swerved and fell. He ever maintained good correspondence with Mr. Robinson at Leyden, and would consult with him in all matters of weight, both in their differences and afterwards."

Even though separated by theology and polity, social and economic relations among the various English dissident communities in Holland continued. Among the 30 Separatists who, with Henry Ainsworth, seceded from Francis Johnson's Ancient Brethren was Henry May from Wisbech, England. May had a 13-year-old daughter (or perhaps a sister - the records are not clear) named Dorothy. Three years after Ainsworth's congregation had split with Johnson and the Ancient Brethren, William Bradford - originally a worshipper at Clyfton's church in Babworth, then a member of the Scrooby congregation and a voyager to Amsterdam, and among those who moved to Leiden with John Robinson - briefly returned to Amsterdam to marry Dorothy May.

A year earlier, in 1612, Henry Ainsworth had published an English version of the Book of Psalms. Printed in Amsterdam by Giles Thorp, the Psalter gives the psalms in both prose and verse and includes musical notations for many. The Ainsworth Psalter is the version of the Psalms used by the Separatists who voyaged to America and founded Plymouth Colony; Pilgrim William Brewster owned a copy.

With the departure of Henry Ainsworth from the Ancient Brethren, the position of teacher was left open.

The new teacher of the Ancient Brethren? Richard Clyfton.

Life did not now become suddenly peaceful for Richard Clyfton, Francis Johnson and the Ancient Brethren. The controversies (and name calling) continued. Christopher Lawne, who had been an Elder in the Ancient Brethren but who had agreed with Ainsworth and seceded with him, published a book in 1612 entitled *The Prophane Schism of the Brownists or Separatists, with the impiety,*

Richard Clyfton, however, seems not to have traveled again. He lived in Amsterdam until his death on May 20, 1616 and was buried in the Zuiderkerk or "South Church," beside his wife Ann who had died three years earlier.

Construction on the Zuiderkerk began in 1603 and was completed in 1611, three years after Richard Clyfton and his family arrived in Amsterdam. The church has a very distinctive tower that was added in 1614.



The Zuiderkerk, which still stands in the Nieuwmarkt area of Amsterdam, has been "deconsecrated" and is now used as a visitor center; a new floor hides the grave markers.

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