

No Pastor was Aboard the Mayflower

The Separatists' faith experience was part of the larger English Reformation of the 16th century.

Separatists were those who no longer accepted the Church of England as a true church, refused to work within the structure to affect changes, and "separated" themselves to form a true church based solely on Biblical precedent.

From my years young in days of youth,
God did make known to me his truth,
And call'd me from my native place
For to enjoy the means of grace.
In wilderness he did me guide,
And in strange lands for me provide.
In fears and wants, through weal and woe,
A pilgrim, past I to and fro.

-William Bradford

The Separatists believed that the worship of God must progress from the individual directly to God, and that "set" forms, like the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer, interfered with that progression by directing one's thoughts down to the book and inward to one's self.

The only exceptions were the Psalms and the Lord's Supper, both of which had scriptural basis, and possibly the covenant by which individuals joined the congregation. As Pastor John Robinson expressed it, even two or three "gathered in the name of Christ by a covenant [and] made to walk in all the ways of God known unto them is a church."

Sabbath services were held twice on Sunday; in addition, sermons were often given on Thursdays, and as occasion demanded, Days of Thanksgiving or Days of Fasting and Humiliation were proclaimed. These latter were movable weekday holidays called in response to God's Providence. Both were observed in a manner similar to the weekly Sabbath, with morning and afternoon services. (plimouth-org)

The church of the Pilgrims was organized around five officers: Pastor, Teacher, Elder, Deacon, and Deaconess (sometimes called the "church widow"). However, none of the five offices was considered essential to the church. The Pastor was an ordained minister whose responsibility was to see to the religious life of the congregation. (Johnson)

The Teacher was also an ordained minister who was responsible for the instruction of the congregation. The Pilgrims apparently never had anyone to fill the Teacher position. The Elder was a lay-person responsible for church government, and he was also the church's eyes and ears, assisting the Pastor and Teacher in admonishing the congregation. (Johnson)

No Pastor Was On The Mayflower

It is interesting to see that - while the Pilgrims were religious separatists seeking freedom from the Church of England and hoped of making a better life for themselves and their children while being able to worship freely and in peace - no Pastor was aboard the Mayflower.

Although there was no Pastor, William Brewster was the Elder of the Plymouth church. The Deacons collected offerings, and attended to the needs of the poor and elderly. John Carver and Samuel Fuller both were deacons during their life. The Deaconess attended the sick and poor, and often played the role of midwife for the congregation. The Deaconess of the early Plymouth church is not named, but may have been Bridget Fuller. (Johnson)

Prior Pastors for the Separatists

The congregation that met at Scrooby had Richard Clifton and John Smith as their ministers (both were ordained ministers and graduates of Cambridge University. They were joined by John Robinson (another ordained Cambridge graduate). The congregation met at Scrooby Manor House, home of William Brewster.

It was the preaching of Clifton (considered the first Pastor of the separatist congregation) and the inspiration he provided to Brewster and Bradford that launched the "Pilgrim adventure." (Pilgrim Hall Museum, Baker)

Eventually, Clifton's preaching and his 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."

Due to pressure from the Church of England, Clifton and Robinson went with the congregation to Holland.



(Immingham Creek is now part of the large port of Immingham, the largest port by tonnage in Britain. On a green known as Pilgrim Park, near to the town's St Andrew's Church, stands the Pilgrim Monument. It is a memorial to those who made the journey to Holland, was organized in 1924 by the Anglo-American Society and is made with rock from Plymouth, MA.)

"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." (Stowell)

Clifton died at Amsterdam on May 20, 1616.

The second pastor of the separatist congregation, John Robinson (later referred to as the Pastor of the Pilgrim Church), was with the congregation 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.

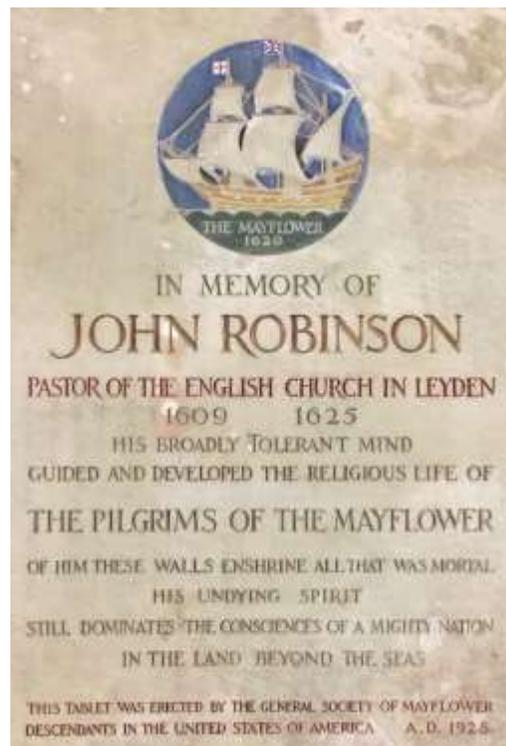
Being thus settled (after many difficulties) they continued many years, in a comfortable condition; enjoying much sweete and delightfull societie and spirituall comferte together in the wayes of God; under the able ministrie, and prudente governmente of Mr. John Robinson, and Mr. William Brewster, who was an assistante unto him, in the place of an Elder, unto which he was now called, and chosen by the church. (Bradford)

In describing the emotional worship service before the Pilgrim church's departure from Holland, Governor William Bradford wrote that Reverend John Robinson,

...spent a good part of the day very profitably and suitable to their present occasion; the rest of the time was spent pouring out prayers to the Lord with great fervency, mixed with abundance of tears.

And the time being come that they must depart, they were accompanied with most of their brethren out of the city, unto a town sundry miles off called Delftshaven, where the ship lay ready to receive them.

So they left that goodly and pleasant city which had been their resting place near twelve years; but they knew they were pilgrims, and looked not much on those things, but lift up their eyes to the heavens, their dearest country, and quieted their spirits.



Pastor Robinson Stays at Leiden

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 1625 in Leiden, never having seen Plymouth Colony. (Pilgrim Hall Museum)

So, the Pilgrims left without a Pastor.



Protestant pilgrims are shown on the deck of the ship Speedwell before their departure for the New World from Delft Haven, Holland, on July 22, 1620. William Brewster, holding the Bible, and pastor John Robinson leading Governor Carver, William Bradford, Miles Standish, and their families in prayer. The prominence of women and children suggests the importance of the family in the community. At the left side of the painting is a rainbow, which symbolizes hope and divine protection.

But they had a religious leader; “William Brewster, a reverent man , who afterwards was chosen an elder of the church and lived with them till old age.”

Prior to their departure,

... they concluded both what number and what persons should prepare them selves to goe with the first; for all that were willing to have gone could not gett ready for their other affairs in so shorte a time ; neither if all could have been ready, had ther been means to have transported them alltogeather.

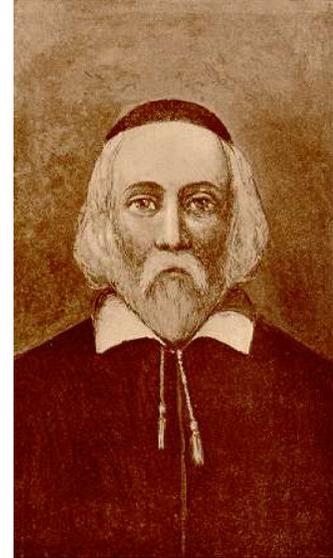
Those that staid [in Leiden] being the greater number required the pastor [John Robinson] to stay with them; and indeede for other reasons he could not then well goe, and so it was the more easilie yeilded unto.

The other then desired the elder, Mr. Brewster, to goe with them, which was also condescended unto.

It was also agreed on by mutuall consente and covenante, that those that went should be an absolute church of them selves, as well as those that staid;

seeing in such a dangerous voyage, and a removal to such a distance, it might come to pass they should (for the body of them) never meete againe in this world; yet with this proviso, that as any of the rest came over to them, or of the other returned upon occasion, they should be reputed as members without any further dismissal or testimoniall.

It was also promised to those that wente first, by the body of the rest, that if the Lord gave them life, and means, and opportunitie, they would come to them as soone as they could." (Bradford)



William Brewster

Brewster practically exercised all the functions of a pastor, except administration of the Sacraments, for ten years after the settlement, and at intervals later, when the office was vacant. (Bradford)

"[T]he Pilgrims perpetuated the church founded in England under the ministrations of Elder Brewster. ... For several years the Church at Plymouth was without a pastor. It lived upon the truths which John Robinson had taught, with such care and learning On the Lord's day, the people gathered in the meeting-house, sang the psalms, had the Scriptures read and explained, and joined in prayers ..."

"In 1629, there arrived in the "Talbot" one Ralph Smith, a clergyman whose ecclesiastical status when he boarded the ship, was a matter of conjecture. ... he persuaded the captain of a Plymouth vessel, to take him and his family on board He was received by the Pilgrims somewhat cautiously, but after close investigation was welcomed, and finally ordained the first minister of the church in Plymouth."

"Although a man of ordinary abilities, and it was said, not equal to Brewster as a preacher, he served the church acceptably for five or six years. During three years of his ministry he was assisted by Roger Williams who arrived in America on the 5th of February 1631, and had been commended to the Colony by Governor Winthrop." (Cuckson)

Information here is from Pilgrim Hall Museum; Bradford; The Pastor of the Pilgrims, Burgess; Mayflower400UK-org; History of the Puritans in England, and The Pilgrim Fathers, Stowell; Caleb Johnson's MayflowerHistory-com; First Church – First Pastor in Plymouth, Cuckson.

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young