

## „COME, THOU FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING”: ROBERT ROBINSON AND HIS HYMNIC CELEBRATION OF SOVEREIGN GRACE

MICHAEL HAYKIN<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** One of the most remarkable servants of God has to have been the eighteenth-century evangelist George Whitefield (1714–1770). He was an evangelist who in the thirty-five years between his 1735 conversion in Oxford and his death in 1770 in Newburyport, Massachusetts, preached throughout the length and breadth of England, also Wales, visited Ireland twice and journeyed fourteen times to Scotland, plus made seven trips to America. Many individuals listened to him, with his preaching bringing about the conversion of thousands. This article considers the story of one such individual—Robert Robinson (1735–1790) — and particularly his hymn entitled „Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,” a celebration of God’s amazing grace.



**KEY WORDS** Whitefield’s sermon and „the wrath to come,” the Stone Yard, Robinson’s rural ministry, the hymn praising the facets of God’s grace, the Trinity.

George Whitefield (1714–1770), as we have stated, was said to have been one of the most notable servants of God during the eighteenth-century and his evangelistic gifts were widely used. From the time of his conversion in Oxford in 1735 to his death in

---

<sup>1</sup> DR. MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN is the Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality and Director of The Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. email [mhaykin@sbs.edu](mailto:mhaykin@sbs.edu).

MICHAEL HAYKIN

1770 in Newburyport, Massachusetts, it is calculated that he preached around 18,000 sermons. That works out to be about 514 sermons a year! Moreover, many of his sermons were delivered to massive congregations that numbered 10,000 or so, and some to audiences even larger.<sup>2</sup> In addition to his preaching throughout the length and breadth of England, he regularly ministered in Wales, visited Ireland twice and journeyed fourteen times to Scotland. He made seven trips to America and preached in virtually every major town on the Atlantic seaboard.<sup>3</sup> And recall this was a day when going twenty miles away from home was considered a significant undertaking.

Now, what did all of those words and all of this travel amount to? Well, in the hands of the Holy Spirit they were a catalyst for revival. Whitefield played a key role in the transformation of the British culture and society on both sides of the Atlantic. From a different vantage-point, that of the individuals who listened to him, his preaching was used to bring about the conversion of thousands of such men and women. This article focuses upon the story of one individual—Robert Robinson (1735–1790)<sup>4</sup> —

2 For the numbers, see Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival* (Westchester, IL: Cornerstone Books, 1979 & 1980), I, 263, 267, 295–296; II, 522–523.

3 He was in America in 1738, 1739–1741, 1744–1748, 1751–1752, 1754–1755, 1763–1765, and 1769–1770.

4 On the life and thought of Robert Robinson, see especially George Dyer, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Robert Robinson* (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1796); Lloyd George Schell, „Robert Robinson (1735–1790), with special reference to his Religious and Political Thought” (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1950); Graham W. Hughes, *With Freedom Fired: The Story of Robert Robinson Cambridge Nonconformist* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1955); L.G. Champion, „Robert Robinson: A Pastor In Cambridge,” *The Baptist Quarterly* 31 (1985–1986): 241–246; Len Addicott, „Introduction” to his, L.G. Champion, and K.A.C. Parsons, ed., *Church Book: St Andrew’s Street Baptist Church, Cambridge 1720–1832* ([London]: Baptist Historical Society, 1991), viii–xviii; John Stephens, „Robinson, Robert” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 47:398–400; Karen E. Smith, „Robinson, Robert,” in *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography 1730–*

“COME, THOU FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING”

and something of the fruit produced by his conversion under Whitefield's preaching — a hymn. This hymn is entitled „Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,” which has been affirmed as „Thoroughly Scriptural in doctrine,”<sup>5</sup> and greatly loved by God's people.

Robinson's early years

Robert Robinson was born in Norfolk in September of 1735. His mother, Mary Wilkin, had married Michael Robinson (d.1747) against her wealthy father's will and he completely disowned her. Two years after his father died in 1747, dissolute and deep in debt, Robinson moved with his mother Mary to London, where he became apprenticed to a peruke maker by the name of Joseph Alderson.<sup>6</sup> When Robert Robinson first went to hear Whitefield preach his motivation for doing so was an odd one to say the least. On Sunday morning, May 24, 1752, he and some

---

1860, ed. Donald M. Lewis (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 2:497–498; Karen Smith, „The Liberty Not to Be a Christian: Robert Robinson (1735–1790) of Cambridge and Freedom of Conscience” in Marc A. Jolley with John D. Pierce, ed., *Distinctively Baptist: Essays on Baptist History. A Festschrift in Honor of Walter B. Shurden* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 151–170; Ian Randall, „Changing Spiritual Identity: St Andrew's Street Baptist Church, Cambridge, from the 1730s to the 1920s,” *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 22, no.1 (2022): 171–175.

- 5 Erik Routley, *I'll Praise My Maker: A study of the hymns of certain authors who stand in or near the tradition of English Calvinism 1700–1850* (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1951), 261. For one of the earliest versions of this hymn, which I have used for this lecture, see Martin Madan, *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns* (London, 1760), 73: Hymn LXXI. For other early versions, see George Whitefield, *A Collection of Hymns for Social Worship*, 14<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Henry Cock, 1767), 184: Hymn LXX; *The Collection of Hymns, Sung in the Countess of Huntingdon's Chapel* (Bath: T. Mills, 1770), 265: Hymn CLXXXIV; Caleb Evans and John Ash, *A Collection of Hymns Adapted to Public Worship*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Bristol: W. Pine, 1781), 324: Supplement Hymn XV. See also *Miscellaneous Works of Robert Robinson*, 4 vols. (Harlow, Essex: B. Flower, 1807), IV, 348. See also the discussion of the original text of this hymn by Carey Bonner, „Some Baptist Hymnists. Part II,” *The Baptist Quarterly* 8, no.6 (April 1937): 304–305.

6 Addicott, „Introduction” to his, Champion, and Parsons, ed., *St Andrew's Street Baptist Church*, ix.

friends were out looking for some amusement when they came across an aged woman who claimed to be a fortune-teller. After they had gotten her thoroughly drunk on what was probably cheap gin, they proceeded to have her tell their fortunes. When it came to Robinson, the woman predicted that he would live to see his children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren growing up around him.

Now, what had started as something of a lark was taken quite seriously by Robinson as he made his way home later that day. When he was alone, he thought that if he were indeed to live to such a ripe old age, he would probably end up being a burden to his family. There were in those days no such things as social security or welfare. What then could he do? Well, he thought, one way for those who are older to make themselves liked by their grandchildren is to have a good stock of stories to draw upon to entertain them. He thus determined there and then to fill his mind with knowledge and „everything that is rare and wonderful,” which, when he was old, would stand him in good stead and cause him, so he reasoned, to „be respected rather than neglected.”<sup>7</sup>

As his first acquisition, he decided to experience one of Whitefield's sermons. He went to hear him, though, as he later told the famous preacher, with feelings of pity for „the folly of the preacher” and „the infatuation of the hearers”—those „poor deluded Methodists,”—and of abhorrence for Whitefield's doctrine.<sup>8</sup> Whitefield was preaching that evening at the Tabernacle, his meeting-house in Moorfields, London. His text was Matthew 3:7, John the Baptist's stern rebuke of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, „O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” When, according to Robinson,

---

7 Andrew Fuller, „Anecdote,” *The Evangelical Magazine* 2 (1794): 72–73. Andrew Fuller (1754–1815) had received this account of Robinson's conversion from Robinson himself. The story was written under the name of „Gaius,” a pen-name that Fuller regularly used.

8 Robert Robinson, Letter to George Whitefield, May 10, 1758, in William Robinson, ed., *Select Works of the Rev. Robert Robinson, of Cambridge* (London: J. Heaton & Son, 1861), 166–167.

“COME, THOU FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING”

Mr. Whitefield described the Sadducean character; this did not touch me, I thought myself as good a Christian as any man in England. From this he went to that of the Pharisees. He described their exterior decency, but observed that the poison of the viper rankled in their hearts. This rather shook me. At length, in the course of his sermon, he abruptly broke off; paused for a few moments; then burst into a flood of tears; lifted up his hands and eyes, and exclaimed, ‘O my hearers! *the wrath’s to come, the wrath’s to come!*’ These words sunk into my heart, like lead in the waters. I wept, and when the sermon was ended, retired alone. For days and weeks I could think of little else. Those awful words would follow me, wherever I went, ‘*The wrath’s to come, the wrath’s to come!*’<sup>9</sup>

For over three years Robinson was haunted by Whitefield’s sermon and these words in particular. He regularly attended the preaching at the Tabernacle and found himself „cut down for sin” and „groaning for deliverance.” Eventually on Tuesday, December 10, 1755, „after having tasted the pains of rebirth,” Robinson „found full and free forgiveness through the precious blood of Jesus Christ.”<sup>10</sup> He later described his conversion in Latin thus:

Renatus Sabbati die, Maii 24, 1752, per predicationem potentem Georgii Whitefield. Et gustatis doloribus renovationis duos annos mensesque septem, absolutionem plenam gratuitamque, per sanguinem pretiosum ... Amen. [Reborn on the Sabbath [i.e. Sunday], May 24, 1752, by the powerful preaching of George Whitefield. And having tasted the pains of renewal for two years and seven months, full and free absolution, through the precious blood ..., Amen.]<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Fuller, „Anecdote,” 73.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, Letter to George Whitefield in Robinson, ed., *Select Works*, 167; William Robinson, „Memoir [of Robert Robinson]” in his ed., *Select Works*, xv–xvi, footnote.

<sup>11</sup> For this Latin text, see „Robert Robinson” in *Hymnary.org* ([https://hymnary.org/person/Robinson\\_R](https://hymnary.org/person/Robinson_R); accessed July 18, 2024).

MICHAEL HAYKIN

During these years, Robinson regularly heard Whitefield—whom he called his „dear spiritual father”<sup>12</sup>—preach, but he also went to hear John Gill (1697–1771). Here is an extract from his diary for the months of November and December 1757:

Lord's day November [1757].—Heard Mr. Whitfield [*sic*] this morning at Tabernacle, Acts iv.13. Dr. Gill went on this forenoon, Job xii. From the 7th to the end of the 12th verse. He was very precious to me. In the afternoon he was in Daniel viii. 9.—very excellent indeed to my soul.

... Saturday.—Heard Mr. Whitfield [*sic*] to night from Revelations, ii.9.

Friday December.—Heard Mr. John Wesley from Ecclesiastes, ii.1. I liked him well; they kept a watch night, and spent from 8 till 11 in prayer and singing. It was much blessed to me.

Saturday December.—Heard Mr. Whitfield [*sic*] very sweetly to night from Exodus xxxiii.18.<sup>13</sup>

### *Pastoral ministry*

About two and a half years after his profession of faith, that is, in 1758, he was called to serve an Independent congregation in Norwich, where he received £12 a year.<sup>14</sup> But he came to Baptist convictions soon afterwards

12 Robert Robinson, Letter to Samuel Lambert, February 24, 1756, in *The Baptist Reporter and Missionary Intelligencer* n.s. 4 (1847): 318.

13 Dyer, *Memoirs*, 19–22, *passim*. For the date of these entries, I am following Addicott, „Introduction” to his, Champion, and Parsons, ed., *St Andrew's Street Baptist Church*, x. After Dyer's use of Robinson's diary, it appears to have disappeared.

14 Dyer, *Memoirs*, 31; Schell, „Robert Robinson,” 16. See his „Confession of Faith” (Dyer, *Memoirs*, 429–432) on becoming the pastor of this small congregation of 13 people. Dunkhorn's name is rendered Dunthorn in John Browne, *History*

“COME, THOU FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING”

and was immersed by John Dunkhorn (1699–1767), the pastor of the Baptist work at Great Ellingham.<sup>15</sup> In July of 1759, upon the recommendation of Anne Dutton (1692–1765),<sup>16</sup> Robinson moved to Cambridge to assume the pastorate of the Baptist congregation of that city. Dutton, though, had wrongly assumed that Robinson shared her closed communion views; he did not.<sup>17</sup>

This church had been gathered in the late 1720s. It came ultimately from the Independent church that had been pastored by Joseph Hussey (1660–1726), who had been ordained in 1688 as a Presbyterian minister at the meeting-house of Samuel Annesley (c.1620–1696). He came to a Presbyterian work in Cambridge in 1691, but within five years, the majority of the members voted to become a congregational body.<sup>18</sup> His *God's Operations of Grace: But No Offers of his Grace* (1707) can well be considered the printed fountainhead of eighteenth-century High Calvinism that rejected the free offer of the Gospel.<sup>19</sup> In the wake of

---

*of Congregationalism and Memorials of the Churches in Norfolk and Suffolk*  
(London: Jarrold and Sons, 1877), 563.

15 Dyer, *Memoirs*, 32; Hughes, *with Freedom Fired*, 16.

16 Robert Robinson with Josiah Thompson, „Historical Account of Protestant Dissenting Churches in Cambridgeshire” in *Posthumous Works of Robert Robinson* (Harlow, Essex: B. Flower, 1812), 278–279. The printer of this work, Benjamin Flower (1755–1829), was a political radical and Unitarian. In his youth, he had attended John Collett Ryland's academy in Northampton.

17 Addicott, „Introduction” to his, Champion, and Parsons, ed., *St Andrew's Street Baptist Church*, xi.

18 Robinson with Thompson, „Historical Account” in *Posthumous Works*, 268–269.

19 Joseph Hussey, *God's Operations of Grace: But No Offers of his Grace* (London: D. Bridge, 1707). In his introduction to this work, „To the Brethren in the Ministry of Christ, of all Persuasions, even as many as have put on our Lord Jesus Christ in their Ministerial Office,” Hussey essentially dismissed all of the Fathers and Reformed divines like William Ames and John when it came to the issue of how to address sinners. He was eventually reconciled to the fact that „I saw no author before me that had either waded or ferry'd over” what was troubling him regarding this issue (*God's Operations of Grace*, i–v). In other words, Hussey plainly admitted the novelty of his perspective that the preaching of the Gospel



Hussey's move to London in 1720,<sup>20</sup> there was a division within the congregation over Hussey's successor and the formation of two congregations. One of these underwent a further two divisions over the next few years, out of which came the Baptist congregation that met at the Stone Yard.<sup>21</sup> Little wonder that Cambridge Dissent has been well described as „a fissiparous evolution.”<sup>22</sup>

As George Schell notes, before the arrival of Robinson, „this church had had a checkered history. ... there had been a dispute about the Trinity which resulted in the suspension of five members on January 29, 1756.”<sup>23</sup> The pastor at the time, George Simpson (d.1763), was a Scotsman with an MA from Aberdeen University. A High Calvinist, Robinson described him as a man who was a „good preacher,” but „a rigid Baptist of a violent temper, a lord in his church, a tyrant in his family, and a libertine in his life.”<sup>24</sup> Robinson noted that by 1759, the church had become „sour and dispirited,” and Simpson soon quit Cambridge for Norwich.<sup>25</sup>

Robinson preached for two years for the Cambridge Baptists in what was „a refitted stable and granary, known as the Stone Yard” before accepting a call to become their pastor.<sup>26</sup> Upon acceptance of the call to pastor the Cambridge work, Robinson noted that the church „conferred

did not involve offering Christ to all and sundry in a congregation.

20 When Hussey left for London, the Cambridge congregation consisted of 150 members or so and 1,600 hearers. See Robinson with Thompson, „Historical Account” in *Posthumous Works*, 269; „The city of Cambridge: Protestant Nonconformity” in J.P.C. Roach, *A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely: Volume 3, the City and University of Cambridge* (London, 1959) (*British History Online*; <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/cambs/vol3/pp135-138>; accessed 21 July 21, 2024).

21 Robinson with Thompson, „Historical Account” in *Posthumous Works*, 271–274.

22 „The city of Cambridge: Protestant Nonconformity” in Roach, *History of the County of Cambridge*.

23 Schell, „Robert Robinson,” 18.

24 Cited Dyer, *Memoirs*, 43.

25 Randall, „Changing Spiritual Identity,” 171.

26 Randall, „Changing Spiritual Identity,” 170, 172.



“COME, THOU FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING”

the pastoral office, the highest honour on earth, on that abandoned and outcast boy. (Great God, he records it with tears!).<sup>27</sup> At that time, in 1761, the membership of the church was 34. Their place of worship was a barn—„a damp, dark, cold, ruinous, contemptible hovel” was Robinson’s description of it.<sup>28</sup> A dozen or so years later, the membership stood at 120 and they were meeting in a newly-built chapel that could seat 600 and that was filled to capacity week after week.<sup>29</sup> He also changed the entire tone of the second Sunday service, in which he lectured rather than preached so as to reach the students at the university.<sup>30</sup>

Marking his ministry was what L.G. Champion has described as „both firmness and compassion, ... both openness and discretion.”<sup>31</sup> For example, one of the members by the name of Jospeh Hart (not the hymn-writer), was portrayed by Robinson as „an ignorant, sour, conceited antinomian whose whole religion was dispute.” Robinson could easily have moved to expel the man from the fellowship of the church. His parents, though, were well-respected congregants and it would have caused them deep distress to have seen their son expelled. So, Robinson dealt with Hart as patiently as he could.<sup>32</sup>

During the week, Robinson often rode out to nearby villages to give lectures in the early morning at 5:00am, before the farmers went out into the fields, or in the evening around 6:30pm, when the day’s work was complete. These lectures were recurrent either on a monthly or annual basis, though some were simply given on a more occasional basis. Robinson made a point of never giving them during harvest, especially that of saffron in late October or early November, or haying (when grass was cut, dried, and stored).<sup>33</sup> As Ian Randall has noted, Robinson’s „love

27 Cited Champion, „Robert Robinson,” 242.

28 Cited Champion, „Robert Robinson,” 242.

29 Randall, „Changing Spiritual Identity,” 172.

30 Champion, „Robert Robinson,” 243.

31 Champion, „Robert Robinson,” 244.

32 Champion, „Robert Robinson,” 244.

33 For a list of the various locales where Robinson gave these lectures and the num-

for those in rural areas was such that he became known as the ‘bishop of barns and fields.’<sup>34</sup> In addition to all of these labours, Robinson actively farmed some 200 acres near his home at Chesterton, acted as corn and coal merchant, and managed the Chesterton ferry.<sup>35</sup>

„Come thou Fount of ev’ry Blessing”

It was while he was in Norwich that Robinson wrote a hymn long treasured by God’s people: „Come, thou Fount of ev’ry blessing.” In the St Andrews Church book, it was noted:

Mr. Wheatley, of Norwich, published a hymn beginning, „Come, Thou fount of every blessing” since reprinted in the hymn-books of Messrs. [Martin] Madan, [John] Wesley, [Andrew ?] Gifford, &c., 1758.<sup>36</sup>

bers that usually attended, see Robinson with Thompson, „Historical Account” in *Posthumous Works*, 283–284.

34 Randall, „Changing Spiritual Identity,” 173, citing E. Paxton Hood, *The Vocation of the Preacher* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1888), 498. For further detail, see Raymond Brown, „Church Planting in the Evangelical Revival: A Cambridgeshire Baptist Perspective,” *Baptist Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (2016): 95–109.

35 „Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Robert Robinson” in *Miscellaneous Works*, I, xxix–xxx; „The city of Cambridge: Protestant Nonconformity” in Roach, *History of the County of Cambridge*; Schell, „Robert Robinson,” 185–188.

36 Cited Carey Bonner, „Some Baptist Hymnists. Part II,” *The Baptist Quarterly* 8, no.6 (April 1937): 304. „Mr. Wheatley” has to have been James Wheatley (d.1775), who began as a Methodist itinerant but was expelled from John Wesley’s (1703–1791) band of preachers when evidence of sexual impropriety with a number of women in Bradford-on-Avon came to light in 1751. Undeterred, Wheatley relocated from the West Country to Norwich, where he began open-air preaching in Tombland. Local response to his preaching was quite remarkable. Over 2,000 people responded to his invitation to follow Christ. In the wake of this response, though, came well-planned violent attacks on Wheatley—his life was in clear danger on two distinct occasions—and those who regularly came to hear him. According to „Bell Hotel Norwich – James Wheatley (1752) (*UK Wells* [<https://ukwells.org/wells/bell-hotel-norwich-james-wheatley>]; accessed July 22, 2024]):

The young dandies of the local Hell Fire Club, which met in the nearby Bell

---

Hotel, took great delight in gathering bands of roughs, filling them up with strong drink and setting them onto the preacher and his hearers. For many weeks during 1751 there was daily rioting on the city streets and again in the spring and summer of 1752, Wheatley being beaten insensible on more than one occasion. Shops were looted, passers by were robbed and women were sexually assaulted in broad daylight. Very rarely did the magistrates take any action to prevent this violence, and then only in response to the persistent protests of various prominent citizens such as Henry Gurney. Eventually, a company of Dragoons had to be called in to restore order. This period of extreme social unrest lasted for about nine months. In spite of this Wheatley persisted and many people still showed a willingness to meet together, resulting in the erection of a wooden tabernacle in Orford Place.

The rioters destroyed this wooden building. Wheatley and his followers, though, acquired a new piece of property in Bishopsgate, where a new chapel was constructed that could seat a thousand people or so. This building, known as the Tabernacle, was formally opened in 1755 with Whitefield preaching on the occasion.

Within a very short period of time, though, there were fresh charges of sexual immorality lodged against Wheatley. Timothy Keymer (d.1771), who was sent out by the Worstead Church, had printed a scurrilous pamphlet in which it was stated that Wheatley had engaged in fornication with a certain Mary Towler, who was twenty-two years old and still living with her parents. Mary's father lodged formal charges against Wheatley. During the latter's trial before the Norwich Consistory Court, claims were made that he had had indecent relations with at least three other women. Wheatley was found guilty of being „a lewd debauched, incontinent and adulterous person” (David Stoker, „Popular Print in a Regional Capital: Street Literature and Public Controversy in Norwich, 1701–1800” in *Cheap Print and Street Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. David Atkinson and Steve Rould [Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023], 94). Wheatley left Norwich for good, it appears, by 1758. It was also in 1758 that Keymer was called to the pastorate of the work in Great Gransden.

This would mean, then, that Wheatley arranged for the printing of Robinson's hymn when his moral life was under significant public scrutiny. The possibility that the charges against Wheatley were designed by leading officials in Norwich to silence him is discussed by D. S. O'Sullivan, „The Case of James Wheatley, Methodist,” *Norfolk Archaeology* 36, no.2 (1975): 167–175. See also Elizabeth J.

MICHAEL HAYKIN

It appears to have been written to commemorate what God did for him when he saved him.

*Come thou Fount of ev'ry Blessing!  
Tune mine Heart to sing thy Grace!  
Streams of Mercy never ceasing,  
Call for Songs of loudest Praise:  
Teach me some melodious Sonnet,  
Sung by flaming Tongues above;  
Praise the mount - I'm fixt upon it,  
Mount of God's unchanging Love!*

The opening line is taken from Jeremiah 2:13. There, the Lord upbraids his people for forsaking him, „the fountain of living waters,” and living instead on the water drawn from „broken cisterns” of their own making. What a difference there is between a natural fountain and a man-made cistern. The former is always supplied with fresh water from deep within the earth. A man-made cistern, though, can easily run dry if there is no rainfall or if there is a crack in the wall of the cistern.

Similarly, this text is highlighting the difference between pursuing God as one's source of all in life and seeking this from other sources—sources that are finite, fallible, and ultimately flawed. Moreover, God alone is the true fountain of all that we have and need. For just as a fountain is continually bubbling up with water for the nourishment of all that partake of it, so day after day God is overflowing with blessings, „streams of mercy never ceasing,” for his children. And how should we respond to such a lavish bestowal of grace? With praise and adoration. So, Robinson, for a reason that will become clear as the hymn progresses, asks God to tune his heart to sing God's grace and to teach him „some melodious sonnet.”

---

Bellamy, *James Wheatley and Norwich Methodism in the 1750s* (Peterborough: World Methodist Historical Society, 1994); Peter Lineham, „The Antinomian Methodists” in *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J.F.C. Harrison*, ed. Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), 35–51.

“COME, THOU FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING”

Interesting, is it not? Believers need grace to praise God properly for what he has already done in their lives by his grace! And what is to be the focus of this worship and singing? Nothing other than the cross of Christ, what Robinson calls „the mount of God’s unchanging love.” Why such a focus on the cross in worship? Because it is the place where God’s grace is most powerfully revealed.

*„Here I raise my Eben-Ezer”*

*Here I raise my Eben-Ezer  
Hither by thine Help I’m come;  
And I hope, by thy good Pleasure,  
Safely to arrive at Home:  
Jesus sought me, when a Stranger,  
Wand’ring from the Fold of God;  
He, to rescue, me from Danger,  
Interpos’d with precious Blood.*

The second stanza opens with an allusion to an event that may not be immediately familiar. It is a reference to 1 Samuel 7:12, where Samuel, after a battle in which the Philistines, the enemies of Israel at that time, had been routed, took a stone and „set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, ‘Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.’” Robinson wanted to raise a spiritual Ebenezer to commemorate the victory of God over Satan in his own life two and a half years earlier. For it was only by God’s help that he had been saved and it was solely due to the grace of God that he had come thus far in his Christian walk.

The second half of this stanza focuses on this first point, namely, that it is only by God’s grace that any of us ever begin the Christian life. When we were strangers to God’s grace—for the thought, see Ephesians 2:11–12—and wandering aimlessly in the world, God sent Jesus Christ to rescue us from the eternal danger we were in and the punishment rightfully due us as sinners. God is the seeker of sinners—not the other way round.

MICHAEL HAYKIN

And how was our rescue accomplished? To what length did God go to win us? Exactly how did he seek us? Well, his dear Son, the sinless Jesus, stood in our place and suffered the wrath of God so that he might rescue those who were headed for an eternity of misery and woe. Recall, in the first verse Robinson has told us of the cross as a place of „unchanging love.” The cross displays the love of God for sinners. Here, in the second verse, we look at the cross in terms of what it meant for him personally: Christ „interpos’d with precious blood” (see, for example, Ephesians 2:13 and 1 Peter 1:18–19).

*„O! to Grace, how great a Debtor”*

*O! to Grace, how great a Debtor,  
Daily I'm constrained to be!  
Let that Grace now, like a Fetter,  
Bind my wand'ring Heart to Thee!  
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,  
Prone to leave the God I Love -  
Here's mine Heart - O take, and Seal it!  
Seal it from thy Courts above!*

But our debt to God's grace does not end there. God's grace is not only life-changing grace that turns sinners into saints. It is also keeping, preserving grace, grace that enables frail human beings beset with fears and sins to remain true to their Lord. Every day of the believer's life is a day in which he or she is indebted to grace. Grace surrounds the believer on every side.

Despite, however, the great salvation that grace has effected and the daily mercies that grace loads the believer with, there is the candid recognition by Robinson that his heart is „prone to wander” and „prone to leave the God” he loves. The believer's greatest struggle lies not with the world or with Satan, but with indwelling sin and the unmortified ele-

“COME, THOU FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING”

ments of his life and heart. John Piper, in a context that quotes this very stanza of Robinson’s hymn, states:

Perseverance is a gift. That I will wake up and be a believer tomorrow morning is not finally and decisively owing to my will, but to God. I have known too many mornings on the precipice to think otherwise. That I have been snatched back every time is sheer mercy. The human will cannot be depended on, because in the crisis of faith it is precisely the will that is weak and failing.<sup>37</sup>

Only God’s grace can give victory here. Thus, Robinson commits himself and those singing this hymn afresh to God: „Here’s our Hearts – O take and seal them!/ Seal them from thy Courts above!” We not only need God’s grace to begin the Christian life, but we also need it all the way through to the end to keep us true to the God we love. As Robinson’s Baptist contemporary, Abraham Booth (1734–1806) stated it by means of an apt quotation from James Hervey (1714–1758), the one-time friend of the Wesley brothers:

Grace shines through the whole [of our salvation]. ... it is „not like a fringe of gold, bordering the garment; not like an embroidery of gold, decorating the robe; but like the mercy-seat of the ancient tabernacle, which was gold—pure gold—all gold throughout.”<sup>38</sup>

*Was the hymnwriter a lover of grace to the end?*

By the late 1770s, Robinson had become known as one of the finest preachers in England. Informing his preaching were words that he had written early in his Christian life to Samuel Lambert (d.1805) of Isleham:

37 John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance: Invincible Perseverance in the Lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 22.

38 Abraham Booth, *The Reign of Grace, from its Rise to its Consummation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: E. and C. Dilly; W. Harris; J. Gurney; J. Robinson; and B. Tomkins, 1771), 15. The Hervey quotation comes from his *Theron and Aspasio: or, A Series of Dialogues and Letters upon the Most Important and Interesting Subjects*, 3 vols., 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: John and Francis Rivington, 1767), I, 325.



MICHAEL HAYKIN

What a treasure do we possess in Christ. Let us come out of our dark selves, enter the spacious plain of God's everlasting love, and lift up our eyes of faith, eastward, and westward. See what an extensive inheritance we have. ... There's a glorious word in my Bible, „we shall be like him” [1 John 3:2]. That's the summit of my ambition; that promise I would not part with for a thousand worlds.<sup>39</sup>

Towards the end of his life, though, Robinson appears to have shifted from this „ambition” and become increasingly critical of his own hymn's Calvinism and its implicit confession of the deity of Christ. In a letter written in 1788 he stated that he considered „a trinity of persons” in the Godhead „the most absurd of all absurdities,” though in a letter written the following year he asserted that he was „neither a Socinian [i.e. Unitarian] nor an Arian.”<sup>40</sup> One of his friends, the radical printer Benjamin Flower stated that Robinson once described the term „Trinity” as „‘a barbarous, popish word,’ which had produced much evil in the Christian church.”<sup>41</sup> The story is also told of a certain occasion during these final years of Robinson's life when he was traveling in a stage-coach with one other passenger who happened to be a Christian woman. Robinson struck up a conversation with the lady that soon turned to the subject of hymns. The woman testified to the great spiritual blessing that the hymn „Come, Thou Fount of every blessing” had been to her. Robinson sought to change the topic of conversation and became quite agitated when the woman continued to speak about the hymn. She had no idea he was a minister of the gospel, since he was not attired as such. „He was dressed in colored clothes,” she observed later, which, to her eyes, meant that Robinson could not have been a minister! Eventually, Robinson burst out, „Madam, I am the poor, unhappy man who com-

---

39 Robinson, Letter to Lambert, February 24, 1756, 317.

40 *Two Original Letters by the Late Mr. Robert Robinson* (London: J. Marsom, 1802), 5; Letter to S. Lucas, September 16, 1789, in Robinson ed., *Select Works*, 286.

41 Benjamin Flower, „Preface” to *Posthumous Works*, vii. For this reference, I am indebted to Pastor Garrett Walden.

“COME, THOU FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING”

posed that hymn many years ago; and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I then had.”<sup>42</sup>

Further evidence of this shift in theological sentiments comes from Robinson’s two final sermons. They were preached at the request of Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) in two Socinian meeting-houses in Birmingham on June 6, 1790. During the 1760s and 1770s Priestley had made a name for himself in the scientific world through his discovery of ten new gases, including oxygen, ammonia, and sulphur dioxide. His real interests, though, lay in theology. Brilliant scientist though he was, earlier in his career he had imbibed Unitarianism—then called Socinianism—and he became this heresy’s chief apostle in this era. According to Priestley, one of these sermons was a direct attack on Trinitarianism. Robinson was found dead the following Wednesday. It was thus widely believed that he had died a convinced Socinian. In his funeral sermon for Robinson Priestley gave added fuel to this belief when he triumphantly declared that Robinson had become „one of the most zealous unitarians” prior to his death.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, one of his oldest friends, Coxe Feary (1759–1822), pastor of the Calvinistic Baptist work in Bluntisham, Huntingdonshire, recorded a conversation that he had with Robinson but a month before the latter’s decease in 1790. Robinson affirmed that when it came to the doctrine of the Trinity, he was neither a Unitarian nor an Arian. „My soul rests its whole hope of salvation,” he solemnly told Feary, „on the

---

42 Joseph Belcher, *Historical Sketches of Hymns, Their writers, and Their Influence* (Philadelphia, PA: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1859), 230. Belcher had received the account of this incident from one of the relatives of the woman herself. See also Hughes, *With Freedom Fired*, 106; Routley, *I’ll Praise My Maker*, 262.

43 Joseph Priestley, *Reflections on Death* (Birmingham, 1790), 21. One of the most prominent of Robinson’s Baptist contemporaries, Andrew Fuller, was certainly convinced that Robinson died a Socinian; see his *Calvinistic and Socinian Systems Examined and Compared in The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, ed. Joseph Belcher (1845, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), II, 168, 222–224.

MICHAEL HAYKIN

atonement of Jesus Christ, my Lord and my God.”<sup>44</sup> Thomas Dunscombe (1748–1811), one-time pastor of Cote Baptist Church, also visited Robinson around the same time as Feary. He concurred with Feary’s estimation of Robinson’s theological convictions. As Dunscombe wrote some sixteen or seventeen years after Robinson’s death:

I believe he was nearer the truth as it is in the gospel than the disciples of any existing name or party in the Christian church. When I spent a few days with him at Chesterton, a month before his death, he would in our conversations lament with tears in his eyes, the state of the Christian church, and the differences among Christians: the longer I live, he would say, the more I am convinced there are difficulties in every system, which cannot be explained.<sup>45</sup>

Robinson was unwisely critical of the Athanasian Creed, but there is very good evidence that he remained committed to a biblicistic understanding of the Trinity that avoided the technical grammar that had emerged during the fourth century battles with Arianism.<sup>46</sup> Whatever the truth about Robinson’s final days—and how thankful we are that his final destiny rests in God’s hands—nothing can take away from the greatness of his hymn as a celebration of God’s rich and sovereign grace, and our responsibility to feed on that grace.

I remain  
your Very Affectionate, tho  
most unworthy Serv't in Christ.  
Robt Robinson

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Belcher, „Note \*” in his ed., *Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, II, 223–224.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Dunscombe, Letter, cited in „Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Robert Robinson” in *Miscellaneous Works*, I, cxlix.

<sup>46</sup> See Addicott, „Introduction” to his, Champion, and Parsons, ed., *St Andrew’s Street Baptist Church*, xvii–xviii.