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The Origin of the Home Counties' Baptist Association

NO Association has been so misrepresented, in the matter of its origins, as that of the Home Counties. It is often said that this Association arose as an expression of a denominational cleavage, on a theological difference, as a result of the "Downgrade Controversy." In actual fact, the Downgrade Controversy began in a letter published by C. H. Spurgeon in the August, 1888 number of *The Sword and Trowel*. The Home Counties Association was formed in October, 1877—ten years earlier. It could not possibly, therefore, have originated as part of the Downgrade Controversy.

What actually happened was that when C. H. Spurgeon, the prime mover in the Downgrade Controversy, felt led to take the grave step of leaving the Baptist Union he found already in existence an Association which, not being affiliated to the Baptist Union, provided a convenient resting-place for those who felt as he did. He joined, but did not create, that Association.

There was no theological cleavage in the year 1877, when the Association was formed. A study of the background of the times reveals that the denomination had bigger things to think of. One issue constantly before the Baptist Union was a deep concern regarding the rural churches. What are now familiar to us as suburban areas were then country towns and rural villages, widely separated, difficult to reach, isolated as independent communities. The churches within them had little or no fellowship with one another, and many were weak, and some were perishing, for that reason. In his report to the Baptist Union in April, 1877, the Secretary of the Union, Rev. J. H. Millard, B.A., said: "The serious problem is to save our village churches from extinction." At the Autumn Assembly in the following October he read a moving paper on "The Evangelisation of Cities and Villages," in which he said that in some parts of the country the churches were so few and so remote from each other that they had formed no Association at all. "It should be the aim of the Baptist Union in all its departments," he continued, "to secure the enrolment of every Baptist Church in the land in an Association; and therefore to promote the formation of Associations where needed, and to strengthen the hands of the weak to propagate the Gospel, which is surely the proper and highest purpose of an Association's existence?"

But in rural Surrey and Middlesex the challenge had already been anticipated and taken up. A few weeks after Mr. Millard's earlier reference, in his report at the Spring Assembly, three earnest young ministers discussed the matter, in May, 1877. They were the Rev. E. H. Brown (younger brother of Archibald) whom it was my privilege to know in his later years, Rev. Henry Bayley, and Rev. J. Hunt Cooke. Their respective spheres of labour were at Twickenham, Kingston-on-Thames, and Richmond; all, at that time, country towns. Their thoughts turned to the rural areas, the small towns and the little villages and the humble Bethels within them. They brought forth the Baptist Handbook, and a map of the area, and they marked the places where the churches stood. They were alarmed at what they saw revealed, and deeply concerned for the welfare of these isolated struggling little Baptist fellowships, so remote from each other, geographically and in other ways. The three young men met again, a few weeks later, and determined to embark on a systematic visitation of all the churches they could reach. Mr. Jeremiah Cowdy, a deacon of the Kingston church, assisted by taking them in his chaise. (There were no motor cars, 'buses, and, as Mr. Brown recalled, few bicycles in those days!) One or other of the three visited churches as far apart as Haslemere, Wallington, Harlington, Alperton. They found that some welcomed the idea of an Association, notably the Rev. John Perrin of Esher, the Rev. Cornelius Slim of Guildford, the Rev. T. Keen of Redhill, and Mr. J. C. Woollacott of New Malden. Some of the Surrey churches were of the High Calvinistic standpoint, and many were of the Strict Communion type, and thus not all who were approached were attracted to the proposition.

However, a circular letter was sent round to the churches, proposing the formation of a "Surrey and Middlesex Association." On the 6th June, 1877, nine ministers and twelve other delegates met at Kingston Baptist Church, and it was resolved that the Association be formed. The doctrinal basis would be definitely Calvinistic, and one firm rule would be: "No discussion as to the terms of communion shall ever be introduced." This enabled a wide variety of churches to seek fellowship within the Association, and many did. "Surrey and Middlesex" was defined as "beyond the London Postal District." It is of interest to note that in the early years of the Association no churches in the Metropolitan area were ever in membership therewith.

The Surrey and Middlesex Baptist Association was formally constituted at a grand meeting held at Guildford on October 2nd, 1877. The first Moderator was Rev. J. A. Spurgeon, pastor at West Croydon. The first Secretary was, of course, one of "the three mighty men," that youthful enthusiast Rev. E. H. Brown.

Mr. Jeremiah Cowdy had the honour of being the first Association Treasurer.

The Baptist Handbook of 1878 shows the nine churches which formed the Association in 1877. They were, in Middlesex, Pinner (Rev. W. Trenemen), Twickenham (Rev. E. H. Brown); and in Surrey, Addlestone (Rev. E. W. Tarbox), West Croydon (Rev. J. A. Spurgeon), Esher (Rev. John Perrin), Guildford (Rev. C. Slim), Kingston (Rev. H. Bayley), New Malden (Rev. G. Simmons), Richmond, Parkshot (Rev. J. Hunt Cooke). Of these, two churches have maintained a continuous membership throughout the 75 years since—Addlestone and Guildford.

One of the main objects of the Association, evangelisation, was promptly put into operation. Mr. H. Beddow went about among the little churches, and broke new ground in villages where there was no Baptist witness, "preaching in a tent in summer, and in halls, barns, and cottages, in winter." He received a stipend of 10/- per week, and his travelling expenses.

In 1889 and 1890 the Association began to feel what may be perhaps described as the beneficial (whatever it may have been in other directions) effect of the Downgrade Controversy. The Rev. C. H. Spurgeon was the preacher at both the spring and autumn Assemblies of the Association in 1889, and great crowds gathered to hear him. In the following year Mr. Spurgeon was again the preacher, and again a large congregation gathered. Many churches which were, strictly speaking, outside the area of the Surrey and Middlesex Association as defined by its constitution, now expressed a desire to join themselves with the Association. The name was therefore changed to "The Home Counties Baptist Association." The year 1890 saw the Metropolitan Tabernacle, with its 5,354 members, 130 evangelists, 26 mission stations, 30 Sunday Schools, 644 teachers and 8,513 scholars, in membership with the Home Counties Association. Other churches from the Metropolitan area, and also from Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, and counties on the other side of London, found a spiritual home within the H.C.B.A.

In 1943, following a series of very amicable discussions between representatives of the Home Counties Association and of the London Baptist Association, concerning the accumulated anomalies arising from the overlapping of their respective territories, it was resolved to reorganise the H.C.B.A. entirely. It then had two "Districts"—Northern and Southern. It was resolved that the "Southern District" (the churches south of the Thames and outside the Metropolitan police area) should now constitute the Home Counties Association; the churches of the "Northern District" being left to join themselves with that other Association which was most convenient to them.

The title "Home Counties Baptist Association" was retained by the reorganised association, for historic and for legal reasons. It now consists of less than twenty churches; but it is not lacking in spiritual life, and it fulfils its original function of being a definitely country Association, covering an area in which are no cities or very large towns, and therefore possessing no very large churches, but nevertheless linking together a number of country causes in a warm and intimate fellowship as seen in vision by those three young men 75 years ago.

About the time of its jubilee the H.C.B.A. decided to strengthen its links with the denomination by affiliation with the Baptist Union. It did not re-enter the fold; it came in as another sheep not of this fold. In October, 1952, it celebrated its 75th Anniversary. Its centenary year will no doubt see a great expansion outward from the Metropolis, and many of the Home Counties' green fields and pleasant woodlands will have been swallowed up by housing estates and model villages, and the scenes of Jeremiah Cowdy's rural rides will have become sadly urbanised. Let us hope that the Home Counties Association will at heart remain truly rural, and steadfastly resist all threatened engulfments.

S. P. GOODGE.

Advance Series of Pamphlets: 1. *The News No One Knows*, by G. R. Beasley-Murray. 2. *Who are the Baptists?* by Walter W. Bottoms. 3. *Why Baptize Believers Only?* by Henry Cook. 4. *What is a Baptist Church?* by Lionel R. Floyd. 5. *Into All the World*, by Victor E. W. Hayword. 6. *What Are You Here For?* by W. E. Whilding. (Carey Kingsgate Press, 3d. each.)

This useful and attractive series of 8 to 12 paged pocket size pamphlets have been issued in connection with the Baptist Advance movement. On the whole the writers have done their work quite well. One or two would have done better to have streamlined their sentences and made their paragraphs shorter. We hope the series will be continued (the meaning of infant Dedication, the work of a Deacon, the duties of church membership and Christian giving are among many subjects that could well be dealt with), and that writers will remember, as Dr. Farmer has pointed out in a recent lecture on preaching, that our task is to make our meaning clear to "the teen-age typist in the choir who tomorrow will be tapping out invoices in a drab city office"—and others like her.