

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_tbhs_01.php

Association Life till 1815.

IN 1644 seven Particular Baptist churches in London co-operated in issuing a Confession. Without any formal organization, they continued to act together, and they had constantly before their eyes the Westminster Assembly elaborating a revised system for the National Church. By June 1646 this resulted in a Presbyterian plan set to work in London, and in Lancashire by September. Elsewhere there was great reluctance, and Parliament had to take strong measures to erect and start synods; it is remarkable that the final ordinance was issued on 29 August 1648, when a second civil war had ended in the decisive defeat of the Presbyterians and the victory of the New-Model Army. That Army passed over to Ireland which it subdued between 1649 & 1652, planting strong garrisons, in all of which were Baptists who organized churches. These military Baptists had been accustomed to a strong inter-regimental voluntary organization from 1647, and they naturally carried over their customs to an inter-congregational voluntary association.

We owe to Benjamin Stinton the preservation, & to John Rippon the printing, of a letter sent from Ireland, dated at Waterford 1 June 1653. "The Churches of Christ in Ireland, united together, reside in the several places following:" Dublin, Waterford, Clonmell, Kilkenny, Cork, Limerick, Galloway, Wex-

ford, Carrick Fergus, Kerry. These churches sent a letter to the brethren in England by the hand of John Vernon, telling what advantage they had from mutual letters and loving epistles, bringing about a closer union & knitting of heart. They desired, not for the first time nor the second, a correspondence with all churches in England Scotland & Wales, & requested that there should be regular quarterly communications.

The matter received prompt attention, and on 24 July a letter went out from "the several churches of Christ in London" to the brethren in Wales, enclosing & endorsing the Irish letter.

Now the Irish letter implies that the Association idea was already in the air, if indeed it had not taken material shape. And we turn to other quarters showing that the Baptist churches were already acting in concert.

We have an account of a meeting at Wells on 6 & 7 November 1653 under the leadership of Thomas Collier, dealing with the question of laying on of hands. It implies that there had been previous meetings, but the minutes of these do not seem to be extant. We find however that in 1651 Collier put out "A Second General Epistle to all the Saints," so that there was some kind of brotherhood evinced even then.

We have also the early minutes of the Berkshire Association, detailing the actual meeting on 8 October 1652 at Wormsley, when the Association was organized, and the adoption of a constitution & by-laws on 17 March 1653 at Tetsworth.

When we enquire if there is any other factor that may have contributed to these gatherings, we may note one action of the Rump Parliament in February & March 1650. The northern counties of England had always been under a separate administration, & so had Wales. This custom was followed, and two Commissions were erected to propagate the gospel in the

two districts. We know that some of the Commissioners were, or soon became, Baptists, & that some of the preachers sent were Baptists, so that Baptist churches arose in each area. It would seem probable that the fact of the preachers being under control of the Commissions, would lead to their churches associating, & not being left in isolation.

The records of the church at Ilston, printed in part by Joshua Thomas in 1790, show that on 6 & 7 November 1650 there was a conference of three Welsh churches, and a similar conference held on 19 March 1651, appointing a third at Gelligaer. Another was held on 14 & 15 July 1653 at Abergavenny, & appointed one in September at Aberafon. Others were held at Llantrissaint, Hay, Brecknock; the minutes of some of these are printed by Thomas, & show how rapidly a system was agreed upon.

Since then we find concerted action in London, Somerset, Berkshire, Gloucestershire, Wales, we recognize that the feeling as to union in Ireland was due not only to the military precedents, but also to a general Baptist tendency; and we cannot forget the action of the General Baptists in the Midlands, meeting & elaborating a Confession in 1651. Yet the Irish churches did stimulate the movement, & we can see two men prominent in the matter. The letter pays a tribute to "the never-to-be-forgotten young Drapes," & was conveyed by Vernon. Some three years earlier, Drapes had published on Worship, while Vernon pre-faced with an address "to all scattered saints." Both men had been concerned in the Welsh beginnings.

Now it has not been noticed that it was under these circumstances the Association idea developed strongly. When any attention has been paid to the subject, it is generally on Baxter that attention has been focussed. And it is true that as the Presbyterian system was collapsing, Baxter did promote a monthly

meeting of Justices & Ministers & Deacons & Ancient godly men of his own congregation, followed next day by a meeting of ministers only. It is further true that a similar plan was hit upon in Cheshire & in Cumberland at the same time, & that the idea was rapidly taken up. But this system, so far as it linked together separate congregations, was rigidly clerical, and it was soon regulated by the Provincial Synod of London. The publications speak of the "Associated Ministers"; the minutes of one elaborate Association, for Devon, condensed by Shaw (Hist. Eng. Ch. II. 447) show none but ministers. But Baptist Associations were never thus limited. Indeed of "ministers" in the old sense, formally ordained by bishops or presbyters, Baptists thought little or nothing. It rested with the church to call a man to the ministry, & whenever we find the names of delegates to any meeting, we find pastors and ministers outnumbered by others. Since also the Puritan Associations date from 1653 at earliest, & Baptist meetings are seen as early as 1650 in Wales, 1644 in London, it is clear that Baptist Associations owe little to the others, while they absolutely gave the model which the others altered.

In October 1653 we have a letter forwarded from London to Hexham which shows us two groups of churches. The London group included the congregations under Jessey, Knollys & Simpson; & it had sent out a letter dealing with "nearer communion" among other things. The western group included eight churches in Gloucester, Hereford, Worcester & Monmouth, apparently all due to John Tombes; it was making overtures to Hexham for communion by letters or messengers in meeting. The objects specially contemplated were to rectify one another, retain consent of doctrine, approving and sending out teachers.

From this time the movement made rapid

progress. The Western Association in 1654 issued a Circular Letter, written by Collier. This evangelist had already, like others, issued General Epistles; but this seems the first time when an Association took up & endorsed such a message with its collective authority. Next year we find Collier ordained "General Superintendent & Messenger to all the Associated Churches," and messengers from eighteen of these signed the documents. Further, there was a second Assembly of Divines convened, in consequence of the Instrument of Government or written constitution of December 1653. Twenty Articles of Fundamental Doctrines were reported to the First Protectorate Parliament in December 1654, and it seemed opportune to put out a second Confession. The Western Association therefore published XLVI. articles, & two of these bear on the theory of Associations. "It is the duty of the members of Christ in the order of the gospel, though in several congregations & assemblies (being one in the head) if occasion be, to communicate each to other, in things spiritual, & things temporal. As it is an ordinance of Christ, so it is the duty of his church in his authority, to send forth such brethren as are fitly gifted and qualified through the Spirit of Christ to preach the gospel to the world."

In the same year, as early as 3 May, messengers from seven midland churches met at Warwick, and drew up Sixteen Articles of Faith & Order, which they duly reported to their churches. On 26 June they met again, at Moreton in the Marsh & formally inaugurated a Midland Association. Five objects were now specified for the Association, & were referred to the churches; a third meeting on 24 October compared the replies. Henceforward this Association aimed at three meetings each year.

But when the Protectorate ended, & the Long Parliament resumed its sessions in 1659, its intolerance

caused the cessation of all Association meetings. There was continual persecution thenceforward till the Declaration of Indulgence in 1672, and the only note we have of any meeting is of the Western Association in 1669, the year when the second Conventicle Act had expired, & the third was not yet passed.

On 2 October 1675 an invitation went out from London for a general meeting next May. This was probably held, though the records do not survive, for we know that the General Baptists met regularly every year at this time, quite openly. And in 1677 the Particular Baptists were bold enough to issue another Confession in print; it was the Westminster, revised in the light of the Savoy declaration of the Independents in 1658. Its appearances implies another general meeting. Immediately afterwards we find a revival of Association life.

From 1678 to 1683 a series of meetings was held at Abingdon, London, Hemel Hempstead & St. Albans, in which the Petty France church was represented. References to resolutions carried & acted on, may be found in some of the church books. But renewed persecution in 1683 checked the revival. With 1688 we hear of the Western Association meeting at Taunton, & the Berkshire Association assembled again that year or next. The great London Assembly of 1689 inaugurated a new period, and within two years we have detailed lists of the churches grouped in twelve associations, to which another was speedily added of Churches in west Yorkshire & Lancashire.

Here then we see the informal co-operation of 1644, imitated in Wales within six years & rapidly spreading till Associations had become a typical Baptist institution before the Protectorate closed. They revived with each cessation of persecution, & with 1690 entered on continuous history.

For eighty years the Associations continued their

course with very little change. It has been difficult to trace their proceedings, since they had no permanent officers or minute-books. When they met, for one or two days, a chairman was chosen, often the local pastor; & the minutes, if kept at all, were entered in the local church book. Five associations have however explored their records and published results; the Western, Midland, Northern, Berks., Yorkshire and Lancashire. And we know also of the following General Baptist Associations during the period; Bucks, Cheshire-Salop, Essex, Kent-Sussex, Leicester, Lincoln, London, Northants, Western; the Bucks, Kent, Lincoln associations kept minute-books, and extracts from these have been published; they all show a steady decline, and except in Kent, extinction from mere inanition about 1760. The Particular Baptist Associations ran the same risk, but the Evangelical revival brought new life; especially in the Midlands, where the Northamptonshire Association met first in 1765. Also in 1760 a Leicestershire movement organized into five General Baptist churches with quarterly conferences, whence in 1770 came the New Connexion. Minute-books of two conferences are available, and some extracts are being prepared by the courtesy of a private owner.

Through all this period, the great influence of the Western Association is an outstanding feature. Bristol was then the second town in the kingdom, and it far outshone London in its attachment to corporate Baptist life. Indeed there was a temporary arrangement that there should be a General Assembly every Easter in Bristol, & another every Whitsuntide in London. But the apathy of the Londoners soon caused this to drop, & in 1698 Taunton claimed the privilege of entertaining the Assembly. Next year was the last in which the Welsh churches appeared, & with 1700 they settled down to hold their own meetings, con-

ducted in Welsh, within their own borders. The Western meetings, which up to this point may be called indifferently the Western General Assembly, or the Western Association, now no longer professed to be more than Association; Exeter, Bristol & Taunton were the usual meeting-places, Trowbridge & Bampton appearing presently.

A comparison of minutes from widely different parts of the country shows an astonishing similarity of procedure. The ministers & messengers usually left home on Monday & rode to the inn designated the year before. Meetings began at Tuesday, often at six o'clock, & lasted till Thursday. Three sermons were the usual number. The local minister was Moderator for the whole series of business meetings. Each church sent a letter, read by one of its representatives. A member was chosen to draw up a Circular Letter to be sent from the meeting as a reply: this was read & approved or amended, then signed by the Moderator—not by the actual writer, a point that has misled many modern readers. Copies were made by the representatives to take home and read to their churches. In these early years there were frequent Cases proposed for solution, usually on points of discipline as to which a church sought the advice of sister churches; but naturally as these were settled, they passed into precedents, and while the custom kept a remarkable uniformity within an Association, it narrowed the margin of difficult cases, so that these tended to diminish. Thus in 1695 we find the Yorkshire & Lancashire Association repudiating a claim of an evangelist to some superiority on the ground of his being ordained a Minister at large by the Bromsgrove church; the Association decided that every minister or “gifted brother” must be called by a church & was under its orders to preach for it, & to preach nowhere else except by its leave. This

decision is to be contrasted for its result with the decision of the Western Association as to Thomas Collier; but the point now is that Associations were regarded as the right body to discuss & settle such cases. A record of all business was made, usually in the book of the church which entertained the meetings, and "breviates" of this record were often copied & taken away together with the Circular Letter. It is only by searching the records of our ancient churches that these Letters and Minutes can be recovered & pieced together so as to regain a consecutive history of any association; the pioneer work in this direction was by J. G. Fuller for the Western Association.

Sometimes the formation of new churches or the division of old ones was decided by Associations, as also the reception of existing ones. Berkshire discussed also in 1708 the possibility of encouraging young people likely to become ministers, and the advisability of providing instruction for them by some able persons. At the same gathering there were resolutions on public questions, such as the war with France & the moral condition of the country; but such a width of interest was rather exceptional.

The London Association in this period was very intermittent; we hear of it in 1697 soon after the collapse of the London Assembly. Then there was a new formation in 1704, when thirteen churches appeared; but five churches withdrew next year, & it dropped into insignificance. Some kind of fellowship was kept up between the ministers by the legal existence of the Three Denominations, & the benefactions of Thomas Hollis culminating in a baptistery being built at Paul's Alley, & in the foundation of the Particular Baptist Fund in 1717. But this has been administered apart from any Association.

The closing years of Queen Anne were marked by

stringent legislation to check the rights of all dissenters, and as soon as the Hanoverian dynasty was firmly established, an attempt was made to estimate the strength of dissent, especially in county voters, so that an organized attempt might be made to secure religious equality. The enquiry was made by a "Presbyterian," but presbyteries & synods had already dropped out of use, and he dealt with single congregations only. In all his results there is no indication that he had ever heard of the Baptist Associations; but as his object was chiefly political, there was no need for him to mention them. The change in the times is illustrated by the fact that the church founded at Hexham in 1652, nucleus of the Northern Association, which had for many years entertained that Association in a farmhouse, now ventured to erect its first building, at Hamsterley; & this now became the usual meeting place. At Tottlebank early in 1719, proposals were made to reorganize the Yorkshire and Lancashire Association, which entered on renewed activity.

During 1718, the Presbyterians of Exeter became conscious that a prominent minister & school master among them was leading his pupils into new paths of theology. Great discussion arose, involving their western Assembly, & they at length appealed for advice to the Three Denominations in London. This led to meetings at Salters' Hall in 1719 when two parties defined themselves, the one concerned with safe-guarding the doctrine of the Trinity, the other objecting to all human interpretations & choosing the Bible as the only standard of faith. The outcome of this was to start the Presbyterians generally on a path that led most of them to Unitarianism, & to put their Assemblies outside the pale of orthodox dissent. On Baptist life it acted chiefly in the Exeter district, so that the Western Association was in storm for fourteen years. Rules were drawn up in 1721, the title was

altered two years later & the doctrinal position was defined as against Antinomianism, Arminianism & Socinianism. Yet this did not allay unrest, and in 1732 a division took place, the Arminians appointing Moreton Hampstead as their next place of meeting, the Calvinists appointing Bristol. So in 1733 Broadmead persuaded twenty-four churches to endorse the 1677 revision of the Westminster Confession, & to adopt other conservative measures.

It appears probable, though the collection of MS letters may yet alter our knowledge, that it was under these circumstances the formula was devised which spread as if it were of inspired & unalterable value. One association after another defined itself as maintaining, sometimes inviolably, the important doctrines of "three Equal Persons in the Godhead: Eternal & Personal Election: Original Sin: Particular Redemption: Free Justification by the Imputed Righteousness of Christ: Efficacious Grace in Regeneration: the Final Perseverance of Real Believers: the Resurrection of the Dead: the Eternal Happiness of the Righteous; & the Everlasting Misery of such as die impenitent: with the Congregational Order of the Churches."

If, however, a certain doctrinal stability was thus assured, there was as yet no fervour, and the next twenty years were sterile in the extreme. The Y. & L. Association became higher & drier, and with the death of Crosley in 1744 its meetings seem to have lapsed. The documents of the Northern Association are lacking between 1727 & 1740, though it is known that meetings were held.

In 1739 however, George Whitfield revived the practice of field-preaching, & the next few years saw an outburst of religion. Although in the Church of England the prospect seemed so gloomy that Butler in 1747 saw no hope but rather a speedy downfall, yet

in humbler circles there was already a spirit of hope & enthusiasm. It did not affect Baptist circles speedily, and yet it created a new atmosphere in which the old stocks began to blossom anew. And though no great field-preacher arose in the Baptist churches, yet new converts joined them, and the old traditional forms became filled with new power.

A sign of the flowing tide was seen in 1752 when the venerable Western Association restored the practice of printing the Circular Letter, adding Breviates of the minutes two years later. Five years later the Northern & the Y. & L. Associations took out new leases of life, while in 1759 the Midland & the Irish also began a use of the press, Wales following next year. On 17 October 1764 six ministers met & planned a new Association for Northamptonshire & parts adjacent; this was destined to be the cradle of a still mightier movement. And whereas the Circular Letters had too often been about nothing in particular, & frequently complained of doctrinal declension; the Northants letters were soon definite & constructive. Thus in 1768 Robert Hall senior, of Arnesby, wrote on the Nature of the Glorious Gospel of the Grace of God, & next year J. C. Ryland senior, of Northampton, wrote on the Assistance of God to true Christians.

By 1770 there was not only a new Bristol Education Society to develop the academical work endowed by Terrill, but an Association in the Midlands of some fervid converts from Methodism, and a new Calvinistic Association emerged, termed the Eastern, whose strength lay in East Anglia, though there were no boundaries. Thus in 1776 the meeting was at Hemel Hempstead, while Robert Robinson of Cambridge came to the front as the leader.

When the Americans declared their independence in 1776, & proceeded to maintain it vigorously, there

was a corresponding outbreak of energy among the English Dissenters, who obliged Parliament to end the subscription of their ministers to the XXXIX articles. In 1779 the Calvinistic churches of Kent & Sussex drew together at Ashford & published a letter stating their reasons for organizing. The same year there appeared a new force in the Northants, John Sutcliff of Olney, soon reinforced by Andrew Fuller. When the latter settled at Kettering, he proclaimed that the Gospel was worthy of all acceptance, & the new revival spirit definitely challenged the high Calvinism which had long paralyzed the denomination. As early as 1782 he wrote for the Association on the Utility of the grace of hope, which had a new and practical ring about it. Three years later he followed it up with another on an enquiry into the causes of declension in religion, with the means of revival. In that same year the Western turned over a new leaf and decided that its circular letter should no longer be extemporized, but that the writer & subject should be selected in advance. With 1786 it was decided to reorganize the Yorkshire & Lancashire Association, & henceforth the press was used to circulate a letter on some definite theme.

With these signs of growing life, Carey of Moulton found his opportunity at the meetings of the Northants Association. Yet there was so much opposition to the idea of plainly appealing for conversions, that he finally cut loose from the old methods, and the B.M.S. was founded not in connection with it, where it might be stifled, but at a separate meeting.

The Northern took heart again, & the minutes from 1795 are in perfect order, while next year the Essex churches organized distinct from the East Anglian. In Bedfordshire two rival movements came to a head in 1797, a Union to include all evangelical churches of the Old Dissent, & a Baptist Association

for the Calvinistic churches. In Kent also it is needful to distinguish the old G.B. churches still in Association life, & the newer Calvinistic churches which drew together in 1779 & reorganized in 1799 together with others in Sussex. Next year twelve G.B. churches met at Canterbury & twelve P.B. at Rye; both circular letters may be seen at the Museum. With 1802 a new Association formed in & near Oxfordshire, & six years later the Shropshire churches drew together. In connection with one of the Yorkshire and Lancashire Association meetings, was founded the Northern Education Society in 1804, whose work is now conducted at Rawdon; but the Regent's Park College owes its origin to private energy which built on the foundations of a London Education Society & the Particular Baptist Fund.

The course of Association life in London is peculiarly intricate, and peculiarly interesting, as indicating many cross-currents, with disunion always threatened as to limits of communion, strength of Calvinism, as well as church independence. Such a study deserves to be undertaken with care.

So far attention has been given only within England; but the colonists took with them the same customs, and associations were formed in America, to quite the same extent; in 1776 there were twelve in England, but some were in suspended animation, while there were ten across the Atlantic, all active. Still more remarkable was the comparison in 1815, when the United Kingdom could count at most 22, with one more in Nova Scotia, while the United States had more than 34. Since that date the organizations have diverged in character; the tendency in England has been to relate each Association to a county or a group of counties, and to appoint officers not only for the meeting, but to act throughout the year; in America the unit chosen has been the State, and a State Con-

vention has arisen, which in some respects corresponds better with the English Association than the American association does. As so often happens, an American association shows to-day what an English association was two hundred years ago; within our four seas we have left only the Suffolk & Norfolk association which to some extent preserves the antique traditions.

By 1815 on each side of the ocean, new bodies had been formed, destined to overshadow the Associations. At Kettering the Baptist Missionary Society had arisen in 1789, and at London the Baptist Union in 1813; at Philadelphia the General Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions and other important objects relating to the Redeemer's kingdom, was organized in May 1814. To study the course of organized Baptist work for the last century, these new factors are all important.

The minutes of some associations are extant in manuscript, and specimens appear sometimes in these pages. A list of printed Circular Letters has been prepared, & will appear next year. Appended here is a list of the earliest associations with the date of their organization or of the first known records.

ASSOCIATIONS TILL 1776.

- 1644 London
- 1650 Welsh
- 1652 Berkshire
- 1653 Western
- 1654 General Baptist Assembly
- 1655 Midland
- 1657 Kent General Baptist
- 1691 Northern
- 1695 York and Lancaster
- 1707 Philadelphia
- 1751 Charleston, South Carolina.

- 1758 Sandy Creek, North Carolina
 - 1759 Irish
 - 1764 Northampton
 - 1765; Kehukee, North Carolina
 - 1766 Ketockton, Virginia (from Philadelphia)
 - 1767 Warren, Rhode Island
 - 1770 Congaree, South Carolina
 - 1770 Rapid Ann, Virginia; both from Sandy Creek
 - 1770 New Connexion of General Baptists
 - 1771 Eastern
 - 1772 Stonington, Connecticut
 - 1776 Strawberry, Virginia
-

The Baptist Board, 1724.

This is one constituent of the Three Denominations referred to above. It is essentially a London Fraternal, and its minutes are complete from the beginning. By the acumen of its new president, Mr. Longhurst, the earliest records have been disinterred from their obscurity. By the courtesy of the Board and its secretary, Mr. Payne, they are in the hands of the editor, who is preparing them for the press. An instalment may be expected in our next issue.

Publications in 1916.

By agreement with the Congregational Historical Society, our Transactions will now appear in January and July, theirs in April and October. Thus each subscriber to either society will obtain an issue once a quarter. Our subscribers in Class A, who have lately received the works of John Smyth, due for 1914 and 1915, will be glad to know that the printing of another valuable work is well advanced, and will be issued for 1916 and 1917.