

The Beginning of Association life in Yorkshire and Lancashire

ON 21st of June 1969 the 250th Anniversary of the beginnings of Association life in a large part of the North of England was celebrated by a gathering of Yorkshire and Lancashire Baptists at Hebden Bridge. The proceedings began with a pilgrimage to the historic Wainsgate Church, and the grave of Dr. John Fawcett. In the evening a united gathering at the Hope Church in the centre of Hebden Bridge was addressed by Dr. Morris West on the subject of "Association Life Today".

What was being celebrated was the formation of the first true Association in 1719. Indeed the first flowering of what amounted to Association life can be traced at an even earlier period than 1719. In the first minute book of the Bethesda Church, Barnoldswick, there is the record of a gathering, held probably in September 1695 of representatives of groups of dissenting Christians known as Independents comprising what was then called the Church of Christ in Rossendale.¹ These people were gathered from conventicles meeting in the eastern part of Lancashire and the western part of the West Riding of Yorkshire. The gathering was occasioned by the impending departure of one of the leaders of the Rossendale Church, David Crosley, for Tottlebank "beyond the sands". During most of his career Crosley proved to be a most unsettled minister. His departure produced something of a crisis in the affairs of the scattered groups who made up this federation and at the gathering various rules were drawn up regarding future administration and also rules governing the personal conduct of the members. Another twenty years were to elapse before one of these groups became constituted as a separate church and this took place at Rawdon in 1715.² After this most of the groups became separately constituted but one of the leaders of the old federation, Richard Ashworth of Rossendale had the vision of the various churches continuing to confer together in an Association.

Richard Ashworth was a native of Rossendale and had been appointed a minister of the Church of Christ in Rossendale in 1699. For a good many years he appears to have resided at Tunstead which is a part of the modern Stacksteads. It is evident that when the federation broke up in the years following 1710, by which time all

the scattered groups had become Baptist, Ashworth saw the need of continuing fellowship between the scattered churches. With this in view he put forward the idea of an Association and the first gathering of this Association took place at Rawdon in May 1719.⁸ The proposals regarding the nature of the Association had been drawn up during the February previous to the first meeting. The proposals stated that each church was to choose certain members, at least two, to act as "Messengers" for the church at the Association meetings. These messengers should bear letters from the Elders or Officers of the church as their credentials, the letter also stating the requests of the church to the Association and giving some account of the state of the church fellowship. Also that if there were any differences which cannot be determined within the individual church that such differences should be referred to the Association. Moreover the Association was to act in an advisory and not in an authoritative capacity. No church was to be obliged to take any determination of the Association except what they found to be warranted and consonant with the Word of God. At the actual Association meeting held at Rawdon on 27th May 1719 a further article was added stating that one person should be chosen for the time being as Moderator by the free vote of the Ministers and Messengers present.

The proposals also stated what were regarded as the three "fundamental, substantial and standing articles of the Christian Faith". To us they are very markedly Calvinistic. (1) Absolute personal Election. (2) Free and full justification by the sole righteousness of Christ imputed unto us and received by faith alone. (3) And that comfortable doctrine of the Final Perseverance of the Saints grounded on the promises of the Covenant and abiding of the Spirit of God.

The first day of the meetings at Rawdon, 27th May 1719, was taken up with preaching services during the earlier part of the day. After this Richard Ashworth was chosen Moderator and the letters from the churches were read. There were ministers and messengers present from Bacup, Barnoldswick, Heptonstall, Liverpool, Rawdon, Sutton and Tottlebank, seven churches in all.

The second day was spent in discussing questions about which advice was sought by some of the churches. One of the questions asked was whether Communion should be open or closed. Another question was about singing in the services and it was agreed that this should be encouraged. The question was also asked as to what should be done about members who had allowed their membership to lapse. It was agreed that patience should be exercised with them but that if they continued refractory the church should withdraw from them. The Liverpool church asked about the laying on of hands in ordination. It was decided that this was commendable but in the case of all believers it was thought proper but not absolutely necessary. The question was asked as to how a minister should act in a church of which he is not pastor. It was decided that such action is irregular but that in certain circumstances it may be done. Another question

was whether women members (the sisters) should have votes in the church meeting. It was agreed that they should except if they had superior numbers to the male members but that the matter be left to the decision of the individual churches.

The desire was expressed that all the churches in the Association endeavour to maintain their ministers adequately and that to this end regular and orderly collections be made in every church and that in the case of a church being in difficulties the other churches in the Association should help. An early Home Work Fund!

A Circular Letter to the churches was drawn up by Richard Ashworth in which he exhorted the people to live faithfully and uprightly and he complains that in the maintenance of the ministry "none are more narrow than the churches of our denomination".

The second meeting of the Association was held on the 15th and 16th of June 1720 at Barnoldswick (alias Barlwick).⁴ The meetings followed more or less the same pattern as those of the previous year and Richard Ashworth was again chosen Moderator. The Liverpool church pressed for a clearer definition regarding the laying-on of hands on all believers. It was agreed that this was liable to a superstitious interpretation and those who omitted it should not be censured. A day of fasting and prayer was appointed for 4th August 1720. Richard Ashworth again drew up the circular letter.

The third Association meetings were held on 7th and 8th June 1721 at Bacup. Richard Ashworth was again chosen Moderator.⁵ It was decided at these meetings that no church was complete without a Teaching or Ruling Elder. It was decided that there was no ground to dissent from Holy Matrimony in the Church of England. It was also held to be in accordance with the will of God to hold an annual Association. The fear was expressed that succeeding generations might abuse the Association and that the watchword was to be "we entreat and exhort and not we will and command".

The Circular Letter by Richard Ashworth was on the subject of administering Communion to an unbaptized dying person. This practice was not viewed favourably because it was felt to be desirable for people to come to repentance before reaching the point of death. It was agreed that the next Circular Letter be again drawn up by Richard Ashworth and it was to take the form of an exhortation to piety and uprightness especially among the ministry whose good name had been rather clouded by the scandalous behaviour of David Crosley. This letter was to be signed by all the ministers and messengers.

The fourth Association meetings were held at Liverpool in May 1722.⁶ Questions of a members marriage with a non-member were discussed and also the question of whether a minister should baptize a person without acquainting the church. It was decided that the latter was imprudent, irregular and unsafe.

As the years go by the notes become more brief. The fifth Association meetings were held on 12th and 13th June 1723 at Heptonstall

and most of the services seem to have been conducted by Richard Ashworth.⁷ There was some discussion on the possibility of uniting the two Associations; would these be the Yorkshire and Lancashire and the Northern? The notes do not tell us. Mention is made of a messenger "from beyond the sands", that is Tottlebank.

The last Association of which there are any notes in the book from which these are taken was held at Sutton on 3rd and 4th June 1724.⁸ Richard Ashworth again preached. The question of the rights and wrongs of semi-private baptism was discussed and it was felt that churches must decide this for themselves. It was also decided that a person baptised should as soon as possible become a church member.

The notes from which the foregoing has been composed were not official minutes but notes taken more or less privately by John Sedgfield who was minister of the Liverpool church. In 1724 he removed to Tottlebank and the notes ceased from that year. Sedgfield's original notes were, it is alleged, in the possession of the now defunct Pembroke Chapel in Liverpool during the nineteenth century. A copy of these in manuscript book form, from which these notes have been taken, was made in 1874 by Rev. W. F. Burchell the brother of one of the B.M.S. pioneer missionaries in Jamaica. W. F. Burchell had been minister of the Pembroke Chapel and by the time he made this manuscript copy was already retired. This manuscript book is now in the possession of the Lancashire and Cheshire Association of Baptist Churches. When A. J. Parry wrote his *History of Cloughfold Baptist Church* (1875) it was the manuscript copy to which he referred, not Sedgfield's original notes. It is believed that the Association continued to meet up to 1738 or 40 but there is little record of these meetings. The prime mover in all this, Richard Ashworth, had become blind and so was no longer able to take a very active part.

The then minister of the Barnoldswick church, Alvery Jackson, tells of a meeting at Cloughfold, Rossendale in September, 1732.⁹ There were present four ministers, Ashworth now of Cloughfold, which had now become the base of the original Rossendale Church, Wilson of Rawdon, and Wilkinson of Sutton together with Jackson of Barnoldswick. Jackson speaks of a meeting at Cloughfold at which these were present. After the meeting Alvery Jackson baptised nine candidates in an open air baptistry in the grounds of Carr House, Ashworth's home a mile and a half away. As far as we know this is the last record we have of a meeting of this first Association which seems to have depended far too much on the drive and enthusiasm of one man, Richard Ashworth. When his physical powers declined the activity of the Association declined with them. Ashworth died in 1751 and was buried at Carr House, Rawtenstall.¹⁰

An Association seems to have been held intermittently during the mid-eighteenth century and in 1757 an attempt was made to form a hyper-Calvinist Association but this did not survive long.¹¹ The regular Association meeting took the form of an annual lecture without

any conference or discussion. It was at the annual lecture at Preston in 1786 that the decision was taken to revive the Association in the true sense of the word and it was therefore arranged that the first of these revived Association meetings should be held at Colne in 1787.

The following notes have been culled from a carbon copy of notes made by Dr. W. T. Whitley about 1905. In his copy he gives an account of his sources which I now quote "The pages henceforth are copied from a book covered in parchment whose leaves measure $10\frac{3}{4}$ by $6\frac{1}{4}$ inches which is about an inch thick. It contains sixteen quires of 24 pages each of these six quires are written all but two pages. There is no formal ending, nor have any notes been added subsequently, except for two trivial notes in pencil. The paper is watermarked, each sheet bearing the device of Britannia seated within a crowned oval.

"The entries down to the year 1817 are all in one handwriting and as the entries for 1799 and 1798 are transposed the inference is that they were all made at one time, 1817. They may have been compiled from previous scattered documents or from Rippon's Register 1790-1803 where some of the circular letters may be seen. Less probably they may have been copied from an original minute book but it seems a question whether there was an official minute book till in 1817 this was procured, till then the secretary had been content with taking notes and printing them on the circular letter. The last entry in this book suggests the fraction of 1836. The entries after 1817 seem to be contemporary and are not in uniform writing." In 1905 Dr. Whitley borrowed this book from J. R. Birkinshaw of Bradford but whether it is still extant I do not know.

The prime mover in the revival mentioned was apparently John Fawcett of Hebden Bridge who wrote the Circular Letter on the subject of "The duties and privileges of Christian Churches". Seventeen churches took part in these meetings of 1787. No minutes survive in any form but only the Circular Letter. In 1788 the York and Lancaster Association met at Sutton but in the minute book is only a blank page. The first minutes of the re-formed Association which survive are of the meetings held at Cloughfold on 3rd and 4th of June 1789 when seventeen churches took part. John Fawcett was chosen Moderator and the James Ashworth of Gildersome who preached was the grandson of Richard Ashworth the founder of the 1719 Association. The churches were requested to send in each year what we now call statistical returns.

At the Association meetings of 1794 at Hebden Bridge the minutes say, "At this Association particular notice was taken of letters from Messrs. Thomas and Carey, missionaries in India." This shows how quickly the interest in the Baptist Missionary Society was aroused in the Yorkshire and Lancashire Association. At this period the totals of the increase of the membership of the churches in the Association seem to have been very small. The days of the great influx were yet to come.

At the meetings of 1804 held at Hebden Bridge we have the record of the founding of the Northern Education Society which later became Rawdon Baptist College now merged with Manchester in the Northern Baptist College.

In 1807 at Rochdale there was a consideration of the very destitute state of some parts of this country and the depressed condition of some of the churches and it was felt desirable to employ the services of an Itinerant if one could be found and if he could be supported by the contributions of the churches. In several years it is complained that churches have omitted to send in their letters.

At the meetings held at Bramley in May 1815 it was decided that a Yorkshire and Lancashire Auxiliary of the Baptist Missionary Society be formed and Dr. Steadman read part of a letter he had received containing some of the dying sentiments of "that man of God" the late Mr. Fuller of Kettering which produced no common effect upon the audience. There was evidently a record attendance at this Assembly. By this year the total membership of the churches in the Association passed the two thousand mark for the first time. In the following year when the meetings were held at Burslem it was decided that if a church omitted to send a letter for two consecutive years it shall be considered as excluded from the Association. In the succeeding years note is made of the conditions of distress prevalent in the country following Waterloo.

In 1825 the Association met at Bradford and this evidently brought back memories of the last time the Association had met there when two stalwarts, now dead, John Fawcett and Thomas Langdon of Leeds had been with them. In 1827 at Leeds Dr. Marshman of Serampore preached and the membership passed the three thousand mark for the first time.

In 1828 at Hebden Bridge there was the request that admiration and gratitude be expressed to the movers and seconders of the Bill to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts which had been such a handicap to nonconformists. Steps were also taken to set up an Association Building Fund.

In 1832 at Salendine Nook, Huddersfield sympathy was expressed toward persecuted brethren in Jamaica. During these years the Association seems to have been very much exercised with the question of slavery both in the West Indies and the United States. In 1836 at Sutton the question of the division of the Association was raised but was deferred to the next meeting. At the meeting held at Hebden Bridge in May 1837 the division was finally decided upon after long, anxious deliberation and with very general regret "to divide the Association."¹² The Moderator, James Lister of Liverpool and the Lancashire Delegates resolved, "That an Association be now formed of those churches in Lancashire and Cheshire lately connected with the Yorkshire and Lancashire Baptist Association to be called 'The Lancashire and Cheshire Association'." The Yorkshire delegates also held, at the same time, a meeting over which James Acworth, the

Yorkshire Moderator presided and resolved "That an Association be now formed, to be called 'The Yorkshire West Riding Association'." It was agreed that the two Associations should meet together triennially and up to 1851 this was done.¹³ To this day the two Associations exchange fraternal greetings on the occasion of their Association Assemblies.

In 1887 the centenary of the rebirth of the Yorkshire and Lancashire Association was celebrated by a joint Assembly at Rochdale. Before and since that time the two Associations, the Yorkshire and the Lancashire and Cheshire have continued to operate side by side and have been of very considerable help to the churches in their respective constituencies. It was fitting that the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the first Association should be celebrated.

NOTES

¹ W. T. Whitley, *The Baptists of North-West England*, London, 1913, pp. 77ff.

² W. E. Blomfield, *The Baptists of Yorkshire*, Bradford & London, 1912, pp. 92ff.

³ W. F. Burchell, MS. "The Records of an Association of Baptist Churches in Yorkshire and Lancashire from 1719 to 1724." Lancashire & Cheshire Association Office, Manchester, p. 1f.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 24ff.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 32f.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 51f.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 59f.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 62f.

⁹ J. Hargreaves, *A Short Sketch of the Rise and History of the Baptist Church, Bacup*, Rochdale, 1816, p. 19.

¹⁰ A. J. Parry, *History of Cloughfold Baptist Church*, Manchester, 1876, p. 98.

¹¹ J. Hargreaves, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹² W. T. Whitley, *The Baptists of North-West England*, London, 1913, p. 117.

¹³ *Centenary Memorial of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Association of Baptist Churches*, Burnley, 1887, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 18.

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We warmly congratulate those who have been responsible for launching this publication and wish them well for the future. This first issue contains four main articles which began life as papers read to the quarterly meeting of the Irish B.H.S. They are "The Cork Church Book 1653-1875" by H. D. Gribbon; "Irish Baptists and the Revival of 1859" by D. P. Kingdon; "The Beginnings of the Work at Grange, Co. Antrim" by R. Rodgers; and "Notes from the history of the Tandragee Church" by R. A. Heak. The issue consists of 54 pages of duplicated quarto, bound in an effective cover. The price is 12/6d. to non-members. The annual membership subscription to the society is £1 and entitles to the journal.

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