

RENEWING ASSOCIATIONS

An early eighteenth-century example¹

1 SETTING THE SCENE

Talk of the inclination of Baptists to associate together has often been a triumph of hope over experience. Numerous times since the emergence of Baptist congregations in England groups of churches have been joined together only to be sundered by clash of personalities, differences on points of doctrine or church practice, decline in the churches or simply ecclesiological lethargy. Relating together has been a normal feature in church life for both Arminian (General) and Calvinist (Particular) streams, finding expression in organized associations of churches of the same faith and order. Although membership fluctuated and geography was not the only criterion for inclusion, generally it made sense for churches in reasonable proximity to come together. A national gathering was a relative latecomer to the field, and was built on the contact established between the local groupings, especially in relationship to the London churches.

The character of associations varied and could be shaped by dominant personalities, as for example in the 1650s, when the presence of Thomas Collier in the Western Association or Daniel King in the Midlands Association is apparent in the messengers' meetings. Both Generals and Particulars used the term 'messenger', but it signified different roles in the two systems. For Calvinists, a messenger was a representative, usually pastor or elder of the church, who attended meetings to consult and report. In the Arminian Orthodox Creed of 1679, messengers (or bishops) were described as part of the threefold ministry of the church, elected by a group of churches to 'have the government of those churches and to preach the good news to the world, or unbelievers'.² Their authority was exercised in the context of the national General Assembly comprising messengers and other representatives from the churches. This acted as a bulwark against overweening or heterodox messengers and sometimes became a court of appeal against rulings made - sometimes disputes rumbled on over many years: evidence the Caffyn controversy which for a brief period gave rise to two national gatherings.

In 1644 a Confession of Faith was subscribed by the messengers of seven London Calvinistic Baptist churches. This was a defining document: a statement of doctrinal orthodoxy in the spirit of historic creeds and a clarification of Baptist distinctives. Significantly it was the fruit rather than the source of practical associating. Similarly the Second London Confession of 1689 was grounded in the experience of forty years of experiment.

Some associations had a continuous existence from the 1650s, whilst others died out. During the Commonwealth and Protectorate, surviving records show fledgling associations exploring the ramifications of church government in unprecedented liberty, all too soon curtailed. Further development was inevitably influenced by the

Clarendon Code of legal impediment of the Restoration, leaving one of those 'what if' questions hanging. How would co-operation of enthusiastic pioneers rooted in the freedom enjoyed after the Civil Wars have progressed if not thwarted by a repressive Restoration regime? A national structure did not exist but when, in 1689, churches were called together in the wake of the Act of Toleration, representatives of over a hundred attended the London meetings. Even after 1689 the regional was the more significant context. Relationships flourished with neighbours in mutually supportive and creative networks. The caveat comes with the number of churches involved in these groupings - far fewer than their nineteenth or twentieth-century successors. Association life flourished and declined in a more intimate atmosphere, marked by regional flavour.

Why did Baptists choose to associate at all? Why the desire to be involved with others? As autonomous bodies, why did they not become truly independent? Question and answer are complex. Part of the answer lies in gradually realizing that they were able to perceive the activity of God beyond their own congregations. Besides, Baptists did not spring ready-made into the ecclesiastical world - they owed too much to the Puritan milieu to devalue its characteristic values of friendship and fellowship. Then they needed to hang together in a world of opposition. Whilst disavowing the church established by law, early Calvinistic Baptists did not believe their churches represented the totality of the elect. The invisible, or catholic, church comprised all true believers, in which the visible church participated and of which it was an expression. During the Restoration Baptists were more willing to emphasize what they held in common with Presbyterians and Independents. What then did associating achieve? - a sense of identity and belonging, agreed statements of faith and a desire to maintain the purity of doctrine among the congregations, a forum for problem solving and resource sharing, seeking together the mind of Christ, offering a united front against critics and a visible sign to challenge spiritual solipsism.

The Second London Confession adopted the standard view that any gathering of churches could not exert authority over the individual congregation. The influence of exhortation was another matter! In 1689 a common fund was proposed and contributions invited, to supplement the income of poor ministers, to finance evangelism in areas without Baptist witness and to sponsor gifted young men for the ministry. The evangelists were to be 'ordained ministers or at least those solemnly called or set forth by at least two Churches but more if it may be.'³ Lack of resources was a concern in 1690, and associations were made responsible for administering the project, taking care to visit each member church and assess the situation as well promoting the fund. So associations played an integral part in mission and resourcing - regional and national knit together to stimulate conversion and growth. A pity then that the fire of enthusiasm - and the London Association - could not withstand the cold shower of the hymn-singing dispute of the 1690s. That failure, however, encouraged the development of genuine regional groups.

2 REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Abingdon church had been a participant in association life since the 1650s and was part of a grouping that existed continuously into the 1690s.⁴ Due to its prominent part, for shorthand this group is known as the Abingdon Association. There were meetings in the 1690s but then a rupture. Ernest Payne suggested that this was due to the arrival of an Arminian Baptist, Mark Key, at the Calvinistic Reading church.⁵ After several years absence invitations were sent out for a fresh start. On 17 September 1707 the messengers of six churches met at Abingdon. They were from Newbury, Abingdon, Wantage, Faringdon, Cote and Witney. This took place less than twenty years after the Act of Toleration had granted liberty of conscience for dissenters from the Church of England (excepting non-Trinitarians and Roman Catholics) to organize and meet for worship without fear of prosecution. The Protestant succession was not yet fully secure. Marlborough was still fighting across Europe the armies of the Catholic King of France. At the 1689 London Assembly the churches of Reading, Faringdon, Abingdon, Wantage and Longworth (which merged into Cote) had been represented. There was a wealth of experience of associating - John Tomkins of Abingdon, still alive in 1707, had been a messenger in the Commonwealth period; Peter James had been a member of the Newbury church during the Restoration; John Tomkins, Richard Steed of Faringdon and Robert Keate of Witney had all attended the 1689 London Assembly. There were new leaders too: William Fuller of Abingdon and William Jones of Wantage, of whom it was later said the church suffered due to his inordinate study to solve the great question of longitude.⁶

The association meeting in 1707 had been called because they found something incomplete in their experience of separation from one another. The messengers came to reflect on the nature and motivation of being in association. They prayed and discussed, reasoned and resolved to send their conclusions to the churches for discussion and response, and also issued a circular letter. All of this was a pattern well familiar from previous experience.

3 RATIONALE FOR ASSOCIATION

The messengers faced the same challenge that had confronted every similar Calvinistic Baptist grouping: how to balance commitment in association and the self-determination of gathered congregations without compromising the integrity of the local church. The London Confessions had set out that gospel churches were invested with the Christ-given power and authority to choose officers and administer discipline for the welfare of the churches and, whilst receiving advice from others, were accountable to Christ alone as head of the church. In the 1707 documents the Abingdon messengers reiterated this conviction in a prelude, citing scriptural support; the documents of 1644, 1689 and 1707 draw upon a range of texts in justification, indicating a lack of an agreed authoritative corpus in ready use, although Matthew 18.15-20, 1 Thessalonians 5.14 and Acts 6.3 figure prominently.

The messengers followed the traditional line. Firstly they affirmed the competence of churches (or societies) to gather and choose officers, then recognized that these churches were invested with power and authority by Christ, thirdly that membership had to be in relation to a single church, and fourthly that each church was equal in power and authority and therefore none was to be thought inferior nor required to act against their conscience. The churches varied in size. A decade later statistics collected by John Evans indicated that at Newbury there were 120 hearers, and at Faringdon 140, whilst Abingdon had 400.

There was here an implicit restraint against fragmentation or excessive individualism, although rarely made explicit. The one Lord was seen as giving equal power and authority for worship and the exercise of discipline according to the same rule of faith. Out of this context came their advice and counsel. In 1707 the messengers asserted, 'That the members of each church shall maintain due regard unto and just compliance with ye Counsell advise or admonition of this assembly of Messengers so far as (and no farther than) the same shall appear to ye said Churches to be Consonant to and agreeable with ye holy scriptures which we profess to own as the only standing Rule of our faith and practice'; but a consensus according to scriptural warrant was exactly what the messengers had sought to achieve in their discussions. The emphasis was on the 'so far as' and the underlying assumption was that churches would have to show good cause and justification for refusing to take to heart the measured comment of the messengers.

4 A PLEDGE TOO FAR?

Association was not to the forefront in the 1644 London Confession, where churches were urged in their relationships 'to walk by one and the same Rule'.⁷ This was less binding than the 1652 Abingdon Association statement that 'every church ought to manifest its care over other churches as fellow members of the same body of Christ in general do rejoice and mourne'.⁸ In 1689 the messengers agreed 'As each Church and all the Members of it are bound to pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the Churches of Christ in all places; and upon all occasions to further it (every one within the bounds of their places and callings in the Exercise of their Gifts and Graces) so the Churches (when planted by the providence of God so as they may enjoy opportunity and advantage for it) ought to hold communion amongst themselves for their peace, increase of love and mutual edification'⁹ and this formulation provided the pattern for the Abingdon Association in 1707, 'Yet notwithstanding particular churches are thus compleat in themselves as to their being power and order, we conceive it necessary in order to the well being of Divers of them and therefore the Duty of those which are by the providence of God so planted as that they have opportunity and advantages for it that they should after some sort hold communion with each other'. There is here both continuity and a development. The change in the first part is significant, moving the intention from a general pledge to pray, toward a value judgement on the benefits and practice of concerted

activity. It is the force of the 'yet notwithstanding' that shifts the emphasis, reiterating the principle but inviting further participation.

Is it implied that for all a church is complete in gospel order yet it might still be deficient in communion by failing to be in association with others - communion or 'firm communion' being an alternative expression. 'Necessary' and 'duty' are words that come with a cost attached. They do not fit easily in a loose-knit collection of voluntary and self-contained units but belong to the more complex network of rights and responsibilities. Need and duty infer a breach of trust in case of failure to maintain the commitment of a covenant relation with its corresponding rights and responsibilities. Something vital had been lacking when the churches failed 'in regularity and zeal' to uphold the association. In opting to use the language of obligation, the messengers raised the stakes for participation, suggesting that purity of gospel order was not an end in itself but spilled over into active engagement - they pledged themselves to others in association.

The scripture models lying behind this thinking are the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15), the conviction that Christ apportions gifts (Ephesians 4) and the corporate presence of the Spirit seen in the conception of the church as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). Acts 15 supplied a prototype for meeting, discussion and promulgating the results. In 1689 the London Assembly had appealed to Acts 15 but confined its justification to 'be according to the mind of Christ'.¹⁰ The image of the body variously gifted yet necessarily co-operative, familiar from discussion on the nature of the gathered church, is here transferred to the association. This text had not been used in this way in previous Confessions. Not only could the bountiful giver confer gifts on the gathered church to work together for the benefit of the whole body but gifts were for the edification of the body of Christ as expressed in the association as well. Is this too fanciful? In 1652, in that saying oft recalled yet little explored, the Abingdon messengers had confidently stated that 'there is the same relation betwixt the particular churches each towards other as there is betwixt particular members of one church.'¹¹ Whilst the messengers of 1707 do not repeat the assertion, the 'yet notwithstanding' suggests the integrity of the gathered community may be contingent on its ability to realize relationships with others.

Association implied commitment and involvement from the member churches. It is just as well then to remind ourselves that this was primarily a representational form of association. What was expected of the members of the church was to pray for others, to send their messengers with an honest account of the life and witness of their particular church, to record the proceedings in the church book and to give serious consideration to the messengers' conclusions. On occasions perhaps they would be asked to release their minister for a specific project. It is a low level of involvement combined with a high view of association, and depends on both trust of the members and the quality of the messengers.

If there was a degree of duty that bound the churches together, the aims of the association as described by the messengers were thoroughly outward-looking.

Fourfold, they comprised evangelism, concord between congregations, sound doctrine and encouragement in witness. The churches were encouraged to take on a concern for the life of other congregations. The annual reports were more than simply news, they were also barometers of spiritual welfare. This is more than a collection of the like-minded: this way called for genuine participation in an ideal.

5 COMMONALITIES

The messengers then set out eight supporting arguments that undergirded, buttressed, and expanded upon the original point. They reasoned for association as a logical expression of what was held in common by the churches by dint of their relationship with Jesus Christ.

The church of Jesus Christ is the local church but more than local. It transcends empirical observation to embrace all true believers. It is a mystical entity. Jesus Christ is head of the church (Ephesians 1.22), both as a mystical/universal and political/local reality. Distinct churches find their communion flows from their first being united in Jesus Christ. They did not associate because of what God was doing in the various members, but because of what God had already done by incorporating them into the Body of Christ.

If there is one body made up of different parts, nonetheless it is one body (1 Corinthians 12.11/2) and it is God who is the Lord and Father of Jesus Christ and also of all Christian believers (citing 2 Thessalonians 1.1), and there is one Spirit (Ephesians 4.4) who indwells and apportions spiritual gifts within the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.11/12). From this common source, it follows that those who participate in this oneness should share a common willingness and direction for concerted action.

With a common source and motivation, local churches share the same goals, to glorify Christ and build up his mystical body, the church. The model in Ephesians 4 is of a community endowed by Christ with a variety of gifts to build up those effectually called into fellowship, so that the churches encourage mature disciples, and therefore association was one vehicle of helping Christians to develop.

Reasons four, five and six spoke of the motivation cited in Ephesians 4.15/6, that in loving Christ and in Christ loving the others with him, no effort should be spared 'for advancing his glory' by the 'edification of his members'. By extension this was the calling of the association too. Just as the effective activity of God could not be confined to one group of Christians, so it could be said that those who were called could not set their horizons solely on their own gathered church. Prayer for the wider church could not be detached from practical concern. One expression of this was the pulpit ministry exercised by Joseph Collett of Cote and William Fuller of Abingdon at the Oxford church, which was in some disarray.

Some or all of these arguments may be familiar from arguments about the nature and operation of the gathered church and co-operative use of gifts and opportunities of the members; here they are employed to support the necessity and duty of

upholding an association of churches.

Then the messengers argued that a mutually beneficial and supportive network was a good witness to the world and an authentic representation of followers of Jesus Christ. To act in solidarity would illustrate to the world that these were not shards broken from the household of faith but a sphere of divine activity. Finally they appealed to commonsense. In undertaking matters of importance - and the work of Christ in the churches was assuredly such - it was surely sensible to take soundings for the best advice and assistance from those closest in faith and order and concern.

In 1652 the Abingdon Association messengers had backed up their determination to be in communion with one another with a similar range of reasons. Firstly pointing out the union in Christ as head, the need to maintain purity by excluding erring churches from communion, a concern that embraced all the saints, collaboration in prayer and activity, desire for practical advice and encouragement and stirring up, plus the sign of unity attested to their status as true gospel churches.¹²

Although there is enough evidence to suggest a connection in outlook between 1652 and 1707, the messengers in 1707 also seem to be aware that this was a new beginning. Consciously they chose a new title, 'consociation', for their project, although it apparently is interchangeable with association. Neither term is found in scripture, although consociation carries echoes, albeit unconscious, of John Cotton's New England network of congregational churches.

The messengers of 1707 did not prosecute the extended parallel - as members in a single covenanted congregation, so churches in a committed association. Their appeal to Ephesians and Corinthians *in tandem* may indicate a more significant status for the association. In some senses an intermediate expression between local and universal, its existence was not merely functional. If they did intend this, however, it was neither developed nor acted upon. Baptist practice is rarely unadulterated Baptist principle incarnate.

6 A PRACTICAL WAY FORWARD

The messengers offered a programme to the churches that would realize their hopes. It is fairly traditional and the messengers in 1652 would have broadly recognized the format. A sermon was to be preached at each association meeting; matters of concern and debate in the life of the churches were to be discussed in a sensitive manner; a Moderator would be chosen to conduct the flow of debate and to rule on what was admissible for discussion; the churches should prepare a report, and messengers should reflect on any issues of dispute or query. Finally the proceedings were recorded and copies circulated to the member churches. All this seems very commonplace. It is at once the bureaucracy of association, and the methodology of mutual relationship.

7 HOW THEY BROUGHT THE GOOD NEWS FROM ABINGDON TO COTE

The proceedings of the association were circulated with an invitation to respond, and a circular letter was issued.¹³ The messengers, lamenting the ills of society, also berated the dullness of the churches. The present freedom of worship they enjoyed was a gift from God but should not be taken for granted. Public worship should be maintained with holiness and zeal, avoiding formalism, that parched desert of the soul. Church members were encouraged to maintain a strong personal witness as salt and light. Nurture of the family in the faith was vital. Members should take care to visit each other, not to pass the time of day but to edify one another. If this was a personal responsibility, so too the church should be concerned for the welfare of its members. This was the task of the minister but also of others appointed of necessity. Ministers should be respected and encouraged in the work and members should recall their responsibility to pray for the other churches in association, 'Oh pray for ye pouring down of that promised spirit by whom alone we may expect the Reviving of the lost power of Religion.'

The association or consociation met in 1708 at Wantage. Here the six churches were again joined by Reading, whose application was accepted on conditional agreement of the 1707 manifesto. The Association continued for another forty years without notable success or innovation. Dr Payne suggested that its fortunes fluctuated; meetings took place in 1747/8 but after that there was a break of fifty years.¹⁴

8 CONCLUSION

In many respects the Abingdon Association messengers expressed themselves in much the same way as their contemporaries. They did not solve the question of the relationship between gathered church and association. The one striking feature is the extension of the Ephesians 4 model to suggest comparison at association level, but this was not fully explored. Perhaps it deserved greater attention? Perhaps in the end the needs and priorities of the individual churches left no room for the needs of the others in association, and thus the model was denied. Abingdon does not necessarily offer a pattern to emulate, but it does help to underline that the concepts underlying the practice of association are complex.

The study of Baptist history in England is passing through troubled waters as we experience a drawn-out crisis of identity. For some 'the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there'. Yet our present is shaped by our past. When the Baptist Union Council report, *Relating and Resourcing*, baldly stated in its opening paragraphs that Baptists have largely lost the reality of associating, we need to be clear what that reality was. The relationship between associating and association awaits a fuller examination. The theology of partnership is an area relatively underdeveloped in Baptist thinking - even if we view association as a provisional structure - and the tendency has been to opt for a largely functional analysis. What should an association do? It would be illuminating to compare the 1964 report of the

Commission on the Associations, the discussion paper on the Nature of Baptist Union Assembly and Council, *Transforming Superintendency, Relating & Resourcing and Continuing the Journey* to identify whether there is an underlying justification for association rather than associating. If the gathered believers are the *locus classicus* to seek the mind of Christ, what if those gathered believers are representatives of churches? Can we square the essentially limited horizons of church members with the rightful claims made upon us by being part of the people of God? The study of Baptist histories cannot be divorced from contemporary concerns of the churches; there is no way back to the world of seventeenth, eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, but that does not prevent us from seeking evidence to explore issues for our own time.

The transcript is taken from the Longworth Church book (1652-1708):

At a meeting of Messengers from ye Churches at Newberry Abingdon Wantage Ffaringdon Coat and Witney Sept 17th 1707¹⁵

Whereas it hath been ye Laudable practice of Divers Christian Congregations Baptized on profession of ffaith Meeting in or near unto Abingdon to Associate together by their Messengers for the promoting of ye Common Intrest of Religion

And whereas it hath been Apprehended that of Late the said Association hath not been managed with that regularity and zeal which is necessary for ye attaining ye pious ends thereof

Therefore the Congregations severally meeting at Newberry Abingdon Wantage Ffaringdon Coat and Witney have thought fit to depute Messengers to meet each other at Abingdon in order to consider and so to renew the Remembrances of the Reasons and ends of such an Association. And to fix upon proper terms and methods for the Maintaining and Managing the same for ye future: And accordingly the said Messengers met at the place appointed on the Seventeenth day of September 1707 and after solemn prayer to ye Lord for Direction in those matters and some Serious conference about ye same, they came to several conclusions & agreements which are to be presented to ye said Congregations at their several meetings for their approbation, that so if they approve thereof they may confirm them by their Messengers at another such meeting.

The Conclusions and Agreements are as followeth

1. Although we are fully perswaded from ye Scriptures of Truth that it is the good pleasure of our Lord Jesus Christ who is ye glorious head of ye Universall or Catholick Church that those who are called to be saints should as convenience of Habitation and other Circumstance will admit Congregate themselves together in distinct Societies and chuse such Officers for themselves as Christ hath appointed for ye due performance of ye worship of God and ye promoting their Mutual Edification (citing 2 Cor 8.5; Mat 18.20; 1 Cor 14, 15.23; Acts 1.23; Acts 6.3; Acts 14.23)

2. That these Societies soe Constituted & Organized according to ye rule and appointment of Christ are to be esteemed orderly Gospell churches Invested by

Christ with all that power and authority that is needfull for their carrying on that order in Worship and Discipline which he hath instituted for them to observe. (citing Rev 1.4; Mat 18.17/8; 1 Thes 5.14; 1 Cor 11.2)

3. That therefore Gospel Churches are Distinct Societies and each member hath a special and peculiar Relation to that Church unto which he hath given himself up. So that he that is a member of one particular church (in sum) is not a member of another, as he that was a Member of the Church of Corinth was not at the same time a Member of ye Church at Phillippi.

4. That each pticular Church has ye Same rules to walk by which are those which Christ himself hath ordained & is endued with equall power and authority for ye execution of the laws of Christ and the Administration of all ye Ordinances of the house of God and therefore no Church must on that account be esteemed Inferior or Subordinate to another neither may any Church or many of them together pretend to any superiority, or to exercise any authority or Domination over another (*citing 1 Cor 7.17; Phil 3.10; 1 Cor 5.12; 1 Cor 11.21; 2 Cor 1.24*)

5. Yet notwithstanding pticular churches are thus compleat in themselves as to their being power and order, we conceive it is necessary in order to ye well being of Divers of them and therefore ye Duty of those which are by the providence of God so planted as that they have opportunity and advantages for it that they should after some sort hold communion with each other and that therefore they should by their Messengers frequently meet together to confer about and transact such matters and things as shall be Judged proper in order to ye following ends. First ye Encreasing of some Secondly the maintaining of peace Thirdly ye promoting and preserving of ye power and purity of Religion And ffourthly the strengthening ye hearts and hands of each other in ye way and work of the Lord.

And that this ye duty of pticular Churches appears to us not only from Scripture examples Acts 15.2 to 29 Chap 16.4/5 1 Cor 16.3 but allso from ye following Reasons

1. Because all true Christians whatsoever distinct Societies they are of are united to Jesus Christ both as a Mysticall and politicall head from which Union is necessarily derived a Communion suitable thereon. (*citing Eph 1.22/3, Coloss 2.19, Eph 4.5*)

Reas 2. Because we have all the same God to be our father and are all United by the Indwelling of the same Spirit of Christ and therefore ought to act in Consert in maintaining & promoting of the same Intrest. (citing 2 Thes 1.1, 1 Cor 12.11/12,n Eph 4.4

Reas 3. Because all pticular Churches are Constituted & Established from ye same General ends which are the honour of Christ and the Edification of his Mysticall body. (citing Eph 4.10-14, Rev 1.13-14, Eph 3.21)

Reas 4 That Love which we owe to our Lord Jesus and to each other for his sake should constrain us to do our utmost for the advancing his glory in the Edification of his members (citing Eph 4.15/6)

Reas 5. It is our Indispensable Duty to pray for ye peace & prosperity of ye whole Israel of God which evidences (beyond controversie) that this is our duty to endeavour it (citing Eph 6.18, Ps 122.6)

Rea 6. We are commanded to doe good to the whole household of faith, & therefore our goodness should not be confin'd within the pale of any pticular Church but as we have opportunity we shall Extend it to all the excellent of the earth. (citing Gal 6.10, Psal 16.2/3)

Rea 7 To manifest to all our Unity in ye fundamentals of faith and Church Discipline and our Mutual affection towards and care over each other as becometh the Disciples of Christ (citing John 13.35, 1 Cor 12.25)

Rea 8 Even common prudence teacheth us to obtain ye best advice and assistance we can when we Ingage in any Affairs of importance and of such a nature are those Affairs about which all the Churches of Christ are concerned.

We Judge it necessary that ye Churches should engage them to each other, by giving their Messengers power to sign (at their next meeting) such an agreement as this that followeth.

Wherefore we whose names are under written being severally and respectively the messengers of those pticular churches unto which we do especially belong as members, being satisfied in each others soundness in ye fundamentals of faith and Church Discipline doe on behalf of ye said Churches and by their consent and special Direction promise and agree to and with each other that from this time foreward a Consociation of ye said Churches by their messengers shall be carefully and orderly maintained for ye ends above specified

And in pursuance thereof it is further agreed that Two or more Messengers from each Church shall assemble or meet together twice every Year or ofner if occasion shall require at such times and places as shall from time to time be appointed by ye said assembly, and that ye said messengers shall be nominated and appointed at least two weeks before ye time of every Meeting that so they may have time duly to Consider of the service which they are to be Ingaged in there.

And for ye Regular Management of ye said meeting or Assembly of Messengers it is agreed as followeth

1. That in ye forenoon of ye day of the Meeting a Sermon shall be Preached on some subject suited as near as may be to ye Emergencies of the Churches at that time and that each Church in its turn shall take care to send a person to preach the same.

2. That in ye afternoon of the same day the appointed messengers shall assemble together to confer about & transact any matter or thing which shall be thought

necessary for the promoting ye great ends of the Consociation wherein due care must always be taken that ye power of pticular Churches be not abridged nor any of them Hindered in the expressing thereof but that they may be directed and strengthened therein.

3. That at ye beginning of every such meeting one shall be chosen Moderator for ye time being for ye better order and decency of our proceedings.

4. That the work of the Moderator shall be 1. To begin ye meeting wherein he is Chosen. And to end ye same if desired in prayer. 2. To call upon ye Messengers for ye account which they are to give of the state of their respective Churches and for the proposals which they are allowed to make in manner as hereafter Described. 3. To regulate any debates which may arise concerning these things after he hath proposed whether ye assembly judge they are worthy to be debated.

5. That the Messengers orderly in the several turns give an account of ye state and circumstances of their several and respective churches and we judge it expedient that the same should be brought in unity.

6. That in ye same order they shall offer such proposals as by their respective churches they are directed to make unto the Assembly.

7. That ye Assembly shall (if needs require) make pticular remarks on ye several accounts as they are given and on ye proposals made from each church & then to consider what judgment ought to be made concerning these things and what Counsell advice or Reproof or other Assistance may be afforded to such Churches suitable to the state & circumstance thereof.

8. That after this ye Messengers shall have liberty and are desired to propose any other Question concerning any matter or thing relating to Doctrine & Discipline which may be of general concernment which Questions may be presently Considered and Debated but if ye debate prove long and the Questions doubtfull it may be necessary to forbear to make any [illegible] thereupon untill it hath been further Considered and discussed by the next Assembly.

9. That a Book shall be kept at ye place of meeting wherein to enter such things as ye Generallity of ye Assembly shall judge meet to be recorded.

10. That ye Account of ye state of the Churches and of ye proceedings of the Assembly shall be committed in writing to each pticular church by the Messenger thereof.

11. That ye Members of each Church shall maintain due regard unto and just compliance with ye Counsell advise or admonition of this Assembly of Messengers so far as (and no farther than) the same shall appear to ye said Churches to be Consonant to and agreeable with ye holy scriptures which we profess to own as the only standing Rule of our faith and practice.

12. *That notice be given at ye end of every Meeting when and where the next is to be held and an appointment made of ye Church which is to send a person to Preach the Sermon.*

This Essay for establishing of a Consociation is recommended to ye Churches under mentioned by their Messengers whose names are allso under written. And ye said churches are desired to appoint their Messengers to meet again on the 29th day of October next to give their direction then to declare their judgements concerning the same and power to act accordingly.

Lastly the Assembly doth desire the church at Coat to send Brother Joseph Collett to preach at the next messengers meeting.

Newberry	Peter James	John Weeden	
Wantage	John Fall	Will Jones	
Abingdon	Wm Fuller	Jos Puller	Edw Roberts
Faringdon	Tho Langley	Rich Steed	
Coat	Jos Collett		
Witney	John Carpenter	Thos Barfote	

NOTES

- 1 This paper was first delivered at the Baptist Theological Consultation, Regent's Park College, Oxford on August 17th, 1999
- 2 An Orthodox Creed, or A Protestant Confession of Faith, London, 1679. Article 31.
- 3 Narrative of the Proceedings of the General Assembly, 1689, p.12
- 4 *Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales and Ireland to 1660* part 3, ed B.R.White, London, 1974. An extensive archive of Abingdon Baptist church records is deposited in the Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford.
- 5 E.A. Payne, *The Baptists of Berkshire Through Three Centuries*, London, 1951, p.63
- 6 Payne, *op.cit.*, p.67. William Jones (1675-1749) was a distinguished mathematician: see Brian Bowers' note later in this issue of BQ.
- 7 *The Confession of Faith, Of those CHURCHES* which are commonly (though falsely) called ANABAPTISTS, section 47, 1644 ed. White, *op.cit.*, p.126.
- 8
- 9 *Confession of Faith Put Forth by the Elders and Brethren of many Congregations of Christians (baptized upon Profession of their Faith) in London and the Country, 1677* (re-issued 1689) chapter 26, section 14.
- 10 *do.* chapter 26, section 15
- 11 White, *op.cit.*, p.126. This wording was used both at the first association meeting on October 8th, 1652 and the third on December 27th, 1652.
- 12 White, *op.cit.*, p.126.
- 13 Circular letter is printed in *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, vol 2, pp.69-73.
- 14 Payne, *op.cit.*, p.72.
- 15 Held in the Angus Library, Oxford, reference FPC C12: 1.267.

STEPHEN COPSON *Secretary to the Hertfordshire Baptist Association and Secretary, Baptist Historical Society*