

THE PHILADELPHIA BAPTIST ASSOCIATION AND THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

by
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The Philadelphia Baptist Association's² contributions to the development of Baptist denominationalism in America are legion in number and enormous in impact. The PBA pioneered in educational endeavors by establishing the first Baptist academy in America at Hopewell, New Jersey (1756), and by helping to create the first Baptist college in America at Providence, Rhode Island (Brown University, 1764). It promoted evangelism, church planting, and missionary outreach, laying groundwork for the country's first Baptist foreign mission society, the Triennial Convention (1814). The celebration of its tricentennial has elicited a renewed appreciation for the PBA, the first formally organized Baptist association in America. Following the pattern of seventeenth century British Baptist associationalism, the PBA was established in 1707 by five Particular Baptist churches as an annual meeting for mutual support in doctrine and practice. Its aim was "to consult about such things as were wanting in the churches, and to set them in order."³ Orderliness in belief and behavior was of paramount concern to these Calvinistic Baptists recently emigrated from England and Wales. This is reflected in the name by which they were eventually called—"Regular," as distinct from the indigenous group of revivalist Baptists known as the "Separates," who were considered irregular in their manner of worship. Walter Shurden referred to the PBA as "the first and, by far, most important Baptist body of its kind in America."⁴ Every other Baptist association in colonial America owed its existence

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²Hereafter referred to as PBA.

³A. D. Gillette, ed., *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association from A.D. 1707, to A.D. 1807; Being the First One Hundred Years of Its Existence* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851), p. 25. Hereafter this work will be referred to as *PBA Minutes*.

⁴"The Baptist Association in Colonial America, 1707–1814," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 13 (Winter 1986): 111.

in some measure to the influence and example of the PBA. Terry Wolever stated that “in many aspects of both doctrine and polity the Philadelphia Association set the standards of Baptist faith and practice in America.”⁵ Henry Vedder observed that the association’s adoption in 1742 of the “strongly Calvinistic” Second London Baptist Confession (1689) marked “the turning point” in early American Baptist history, “fixed the character of the denomination,” and overcame the influence of Arminianism.⁶ “Pretty much everything good in our history from 1700 to 1850, may be traced to its initiative or active cooperation.”⁷ In his history of the Baptists, David Benedict noted a major epoch of Baptist denominationalism in America with the founding of the PBA. As the forerunner of Baptist associationalism, it was imitated by those which succeeded it, “and by it were given rules, and even doctrine, to many and indeed most of the first Associations in the southern and western States.”⁸ So important was its influence on Baptist life that Robert T. Handy referred to it as simply “the Philadelphia tradition.”⁹

Writing on the associational principle of Baptist organization, Winthrop Hudson stated that Baptists as arch-individualists “have insisted that their associational bodies have no real powers.” He went on to admit, however, what several other Baptist historians have observed: this theory did not always square with practice.¹⁰ Early American Baptist associations, beginning with the PBA, did assume a great deal of power at the same time they affirmed the independence of the local assembly. This would suggest a conflict of authority which would create disunity and dissension. But what actually occurred, with few exceptions, was a remarkably harmonious relationship between the association and its member churches.¹¹ Indeed, these churches

⁵Cited from the preface in James L. Clark, “*To Set Them in Order: Some Influences of the Philadelphia Baptist Association Upon Baptists in America to 1814*” (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2001), p. iii.

⁶*A History of the Baptists in the Middle States* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1898), p. 92.

⁷Henry Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907), p. 306.

⁸*A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America, and Other Parts of the World*, 2 vols. (reprint of 1813 ed., Gallatin, TN: Church History Research and Archives, 1985), 1:273, 595.

⁹“The Philadelphia Tradition,” in *Baptist Concepts of the Church*, ed. Winthrop Still Hudson (Chicago: Judson Press, 1959), p. 30.

¹⁰“The Associational Principle Among Baptists,” *Foundations* 1 (January 1958): 10.

¹¹Among the few exceptions to this harmonious relationship was a rift between the PBA and First Baptist Church of Philadelphia in 1819. See *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, Convened in the Meeting House of the Third Baptist Church of*

willingly conceded certain powers to the association for resolving issues which they had the prerogative to decide independently of any external arbiter. In other words, they relied on the judgment of a body outside of themselves for direction and mediation, deferring frequently and submissively to the decisions of the association. This practice reveals a couple of things: (1) early American Baptist congregations were not purely autonomous as their policy statements would suggest, and (2) they were willing to live with the tension of a two-tiered ecclesiastical authority—the one local, the other associational. In fact, they welcomed it.

Several implications arise from such an arrangement. Early Baptist associations, specifically the PBA, appear to have had hierarchical features of presbyterianism, where a bureaucratic synod of elders makes decisions on behalf of denominational churches. Yet Baptists refused to concede any similarity to this type of polity. Instead, they preferred to use a word that captured the independent/interdependent relationship between church and association—connectionalism, an explanatory term of and often synonymous with associationalism. But this terminology of itself begs the question, which is the subject of this article: where does denominational power actually reside in the church/association connection? Using the PBA as a case study, we will pursue this question by (1) noting various factors leading to the formation of the association, (2) observing the paternal role the PBA assumed in relation to its own members and other associations, (3) examining the criteria colonial Baptists themselves used to justify associationalism (these may be categorized as practical, biblical, and theological), and finally, (4) deciding whether associationalism is a valid and appropriate means of pursuing Baptist ecclesiology.

No issue is more fundamental and germane to the question of Baptist associationalism than the definition and nature of the church. All other questions regarding Baptist ecclesiology begin with “what is the church?” Landmarkist-type Baptists will dogmatically limit the church exclusively to the local assembly of baptized believers. They argue that when Christ speaks of the church in Matthew 16:18, he is referring not to a universal body, but to an immediate localized gathering of visible saints. Regular Baptists, however, took a different view. They recognized that the predominant reference to the church in the New Testament is to a local congregation, but Christ’s body is inclusive of all believers universally. The indigenous assembly is only a local manifestation of the larger church. And since the body of Christ cannot be limited to any one congregation, but includes all true churches, then a more formal connection between them was not only permissible

Philadelphia, October 5, 6, and 7—1819 and William D. Thompson, *Philadelphia’s First Baptists: A Brief History of The First Baptist Church of Philadelphia Founded 1698* (Philadelphia: First Baptist Church, 1989), p. 21.

but suitable. However, it does not necessarily follow that all societies of Christians believe and behave in an orderly scriptural manner. Therefore, the basis of fellowship for Regular Baptists would mean the acceptance of certain non-negotiable distinctives as expressed in their statements of faith. Baptist confessionalism, in fact, was pivotal to the formation of Baptist associations.

THE FORMATION OF THE PHILADELPHIA BAPTIST ASSOCIATION

Due to the generous policy of religious freedom followed by William Penn and other Quaker proprietors of the Middle Colonies, Welsh and English Baptists found a convenient place of settlement in the valley areas of eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. Three years after the founding of Pennsylvania in 1681, Thomas Dungan came from Rhode Island to gather a Baptist church at Cold Spring in Bucks County. Unable to maintain itself, the small congregation disbanded in 1702 when its remaining members joined what has become the oldest continuing Baptist church in the region—the Lower Dublin, also known as Pennepek (currently Pennypak). Elias Keach (1665–1699), son of the famous London Baptist preacher Benjamin Keach, became the first pastor of the church in 1688. Soon this congregation produced four branches— Middletown (1688), Piscataway (1689), Philadelphia¹² (1698), and Cohansey (1690). Since these groups were closely connected to the Pennepek church, they relied on its ministers to supply their pulpits and provide pastoral leadership until they could become self-supporting.¹³ Horatio Gates Jones, citing the Pennepek record book, notes that

for the convenience of the brethren residing in the places named, the Church appointed “General Meetings,” so that opportunity was offered for closer acquaintance, communion, and fellowship.... The Records state... “when Elias Keach was with us, we commonly acted as a particular Church, and at the general meetings all the Brethren from all parts of the Provinces, were desired generally to come together to hear the word &c and to communicate at the Lord’s Table. These general meetings were appointed twice in the year.... But it is to be noted that in these

¹²Although the First Church of Philadelphia was organized in 1698, its membership was connected with the Pennepek Church until 1746, when it became independent. Hence, the Pennepek and Philadelphia congregations were considered *one* of the founding churches of the Philadelphia Association.

¹³Horatio Gates Jones states that, due to Elias Keach’s zealous itinerant ministry throughout the Delaware Valley region, his converts “with such other Baptists as he found among the new emigrants, joined the Pennepek Church, so that, at one time, all the Baptists of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, were regarded as general members of this Church” (*Historical Sketch of the Lower Dublin (or Pennepek) Baptist Church* [Morristown, NY: n.p., 1869], pp. 6–7).

times of beginning, we had not opportunity to be formed into particular Churches, for want of persons fitly qualified to oversee a Church or to carry on the work of the ministry.”¹⁴

Wishing to maintain a strong doctrinal and familial unity, these five small assemblies formed the PBA in September 1707. Another congregation included in its founding was the Welsh Tract Church.¹⁵ The original group of sixteen had emigrated from Pembrokeshire, South Wales in 1701¹⁶ and joined the Pennepek congregation. However, because Pennepek did not require the laying of hands upon newly baptized converts, the Welsh group left in 1703 to settle a 30,000 acre land tract purchased from William Penn. This area, near New Castle on the Delaware River, they called *Rhandir y Cymrn*, commonly known as Welsh Tract.

The formation of the PBA was a natural outcome of the “Yearly Meetings” which met in the various churches connected to Pennepek. The church’s record book mentions that “the brethren were thus made acquainted with each other; the spirit of piety increased; the ungodly were often converted; and fraternal intercourse was greatly promoted.”¹⁷ As the churches grew in number and membership, questions arose regarding faith and discipline. Consequently, they thought it advisable to have a more formal yearly meeting at which time such questions could be discussed and answered. The term “association” was deliberately chosen, since churches would make up the membership and be represented by messengers or delegates. No church would be allowed membership “which denied or concealed any of the doctrines of grace,” and the “New Testament was to be...[the PBA’s] rule of faith and practice.”¹⁸ Furthermore, it was agreed that any alien preacher

¹⁴Ibid., p. 7. Morgan Edwards affirms, “They were all one Church and Pennepek the centre of union” (*Materials Towards a History of the Baptists*, 2 vols. [reprint ed., Danielsville, GA: Heritage Papers, 1984], 1:6). Original spelling and punctuation are retained in cited quotations.

¹⁵Francis W. Sacks reminds us that “with the exception of Elias Keach and Thomas Killingsworth, the most influential ministers [of the Philadelphia area Baptist churches] were all Welshmen, or descendants of the church at Welsh Tract... What is significant...is that all had experienced Particular Baptist connectionalism in England [via Wales],” and all were “firmly established in a Calvinistic direction” (*The Philadelphia Baptist Tradition of Church and Church Authority: An Ecumenical Analysis and Theological Interpretation* [Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989], p. 142).

¹⁶For a description of the beginnings of Welsh Tract, see Joshua Thomas, *The American Baptist Heritage in Wales* (reprint ed., Lafayette, TN: Church History Research and Archives Affiliation, 1976), pp. 2, 106–08, and *Records of the Welsh Tract Baptist Meeting, Pencader Hundred, New Castle County, Delaware, 1701–1828* (Wilmington: The Historical Society of Delaware, 1904), pp. 3–11.

¹⁷Jones, *Historical Sketch*, p. 13.

¹⁸*PBA Minutes*, p. 4.

without ministerial gifts or recommendation would be refused admittance to any member churches.¹⁹ In order to safeguard the churches' independence, the PBA was to function only as an advisory not a judicial body. Theoretically, it was not supposed to have any "power or authority to bind the Churches composing it."²⁰ But, as we shall see, theory and practice do not always agree: power and authority were assumed by the PBA over the churches, sometimes in subtle, but nevertheless quite demonstrable ways.

In forming their association, the Regular Baptists of the Philadelphia region had obvious examples to follow in their British counterparts. Nearly all the original PBA membership originated with Particular Baptists from England and South Wales. These had embraced Calvinist confessional theology and were experienced in the "affairs of churches and associations in their own countries."²¹ It is understandable, therefore, that the PBA leadership would espouse the British methodology of organization. Unlike the Anglicans whose episcopal hierarchy they vehemently rejected, the Presbyterians whose synodical administration they resented, and the Congregationalists who generally avoided inter-church associations,²² British Baptists sought a polity that would guarantee congregational independency, promote ecclesiastical unity, and preserve denominational integrity in the face of misunderstanding and opposition from their fellow Protestant non-conformists and persecution from the Anglican establishment. Seeing the need for a united voice in defense of their Baptist distinctives, English Particular Baptist churches began informal associations based upon their doctrinal beliefs as expressed in confessional statements. In fact, the *First London Confession* of 1644 encouraged connectionalism based on a common faith.

And although the particular Congregations be distinct and servarll Bodies, every one a compact and knit Citie in it selfe; yet are they all to walk by one and the same Rule, and by all meanes convenient to have the

¹⁹Ibid., p. 25.

²⁰Jones, *Historical Sketch*, p. 13.

²¹*PBA Minutes*, p. 25.

²²As persecuted nonconformists, Puritan Congregationalists were never able to fully realize their peculiar "semi-separatistic" ecclesiology in England during the seventeenth century. They met with temporary success in the Netherlands and finally brought their polity to fruition in New England where ministers were joined in synodical "consociations" whose policies were always subject to government approval. Such a closed state-church cooperative was intolerable to most Baptists. For the development and dissolution of congregationalism in Holland, see Raymond Phineas Stearns, *Congregationalism in the Dutch Netherlands: The Rise and Fall of the English Congregational Classis 1621–1635* (Chicago: American Society of Church History, 1940), and for informative analysis of congregationalism in New England, consult Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts 1630–1650* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965).

counsell and help of one another in all needfull affaires of the Church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their onely head.²³

In 1689, at their first annual national assembly,²⁴ approximately one hundred Particular Baptist church representatives approved a 1677 revision of the Westminster Confession, calling it the *Second London Baptist Confession*.²⁵ It is this confession, with two additional articles (laying on of hands and hymn singing) which was officially adopted by the PBA in 1742. The section on the Church went beyond the *First London Confession's* statement to explain the relationship of the Particular Baptist General Assembly to its constituents:

14...the Churches of Christ,²⁶...ought to hold communion amongst themselves for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification. 15. In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of Doctrine, or Administration; wherein either the Churches in general are concerned, or any one Church in their peace, union, and edification; or any member, or members, of any Church are injured, in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to truth, and order: it is according to the mind of Christ, that many Churches holding communion together, do by their messengers meet consider, and give their advice in, or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the Churches concerned; howbeit these messengers assembled, are not entrusted with any Church-power properly so called; or with any jurisdiction over the Churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any Churches, or Persons: or to impose

²³*The Confession of Faith, Of Those Churches which are commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptists* (London: Matthew Simmons, 1644), Article 47. Cited hereafter as the *First London Confession*.

²⁴This assembly, coinciding with the parliamentary Act of Toleration that same year, suggests an eagerness among Baptists to resume associational life so long delayed by government oppression. W. T. Whitley writes, "Here then we see the informal co-operation of 1644 [by the original seven London Particular Baptist churches], imitated in Wales within six years & rapidly spreading till Associations had become a typical Baptist institution.... with 1690 [they] entered on continuous history" ("Associational Life till 1815," in *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society* [London: Baptist Union Publication Dept., 1921], p. 24).

²⁵In early Baptist literature this is frequently referred as the "Century Confession" since approximately one hundred ministers subscribed to it.

²⁶It is noteworthy that member churches, when addressing the PBA, in nearly every instance during the 18th century, identified themselves as "the Church of Christ at _____." This would indicate that in following the pattern of the London confessions, the churches wanted first to recognize Jesus Christ as their Head and second, they did not consider "Baptist" a nominal but a descriptive term. Likewise, their locations of worship were called meetinghouses not Baptist churches. A Baptist church was a people, not a place. Only as religious groups proliferated in 19th century America did Baptists begin to distinguish their houses of worship from others with denominational labels and eventually logos in the 20th century.

their determination on the Churches, or Officers.²⁷

Among the representatives at the 1689 assembly was a group of Welsh Baptists who could trace their history back to 1649 with the coming of John Myles (1621–1683) and the formation of the first Baptist church in Wales at Ilston. Encouraged by the London Particular Baptists, Myles and his associates baptized scores of converts in the South Wales region and gathered them into worship groups. Although these new congregations were widely scattered, they were nevertheless considered branches or daughters of the Ilston “mother” church. Because great distance prevented their meeting together, Myles would travel to their locations to preach and administer the ordinances. But as Welsh Baptist historian Joshua Thomas relates, new converts

were not to be members of the [branch congregation] church until they came to Ilston and there be admitted. Members from Ilston might go upon those occasions to those distant parts to assist; and it was ordered that the brethren in the eastern parts would without fail send two or more from them to every meeting at Ilston to acquaint the church there with the state of all things in the east, that so they might better watch over them in the Lord.²⁸

In 1657, the Ilston ministers framed nineteen new regulations governing the practices of the several branch churches. Their tone is prescriptive not suggestive. For example, no brother could “hold forth any doctrines before the world at any appointed meetings, except such as are approved prophets [i.e., preachers] or put upon trial of their gifts for prophesying before the church” and no church or individual members could “pass any censure, receive any members, or pass any acts, without the advice and consent of those who are over them in the Lord.”²⁹ Such statements indicate a suspension of congregational in favor of presbyterian polity. This centralized connectionalism was obviously an expedient measure for purposes of unity and accountability, but it revealed a hierarchical relationship uncharacteristic of a Baptist polity which has traditionally viewed the local assembly as autonomous.

Within a short time other congregations were established (Hay, Llantrisant, Carmarthen, and Abergavenny), but all regarded Ilston as something of a *primus inter pares* by virtue of its prominence and

²⁷ *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* (London: n.p., 1677), 26.14–15. Cited hereafter as the *Second London Confession*.

²⁸ *The American Baptist Heritage in Wales, Part One: The Histories of Four Welsh Baptist Churches c. 1633–1770 Selected From The History of the Baptist Churches in Wales* (reprint ed., Lafayette, TN: Church History Research and Archives Affiliation, 1976), pp. 48–49.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

leadership. This is strikingly similar to the relationship the Pennepek church bore to its branch churches in colonial America.³⁰ The Ilston-centered group of churches began an association in 1650 to strengthen their ties and decide relevant questions of mutual concern, e.g., logistical and financial support of ministers, administration of discipline, mixed marriages, and the persistent problems of whether to allow congregational singing and laying on of hands. Again, the purposes of the early Pennepek-centered PBA were quite similar.

Some Congregational churches in Wales practiced open communion, but were considered out of order by Myles. His view of closed communion prevailed and became a requirement for membership in the association. Indeed, at all the general association meetings, “Mr. John Miles was the leading minister.”³¹ Myles might have felt at greater liberty to practice a centralized ecclesiology after traveling in 1651 to Glass House, a London Particular Baptist church whose sponsorship of Miles facilitated the original Welsh mission two years earlier. With introductory letters in hand from five churches questioning the advisability of separating into “more particular congregations,” Miles received an answer that undoubtedly satisfied him:

We advise, if God hath endowed you with gifts whereby you may edify one another, and keep up the order and ministry of the church, you may distinguish into more particular congregations, but with mutual consent: and if there be among you those who can in some measure take the oversight of you in the Lord, but not else.³²

In this response we may note at least three practices that early British Baptists considered essential to proper ecclesiology: (1) only when branch congregations are equipped with the proper ministerial gifts (probably referring to qualified ministers) should they become independent churches, (2) independence should be a matter agreed upon bilaterally, that is, by the branch church and its parent, and (3) good order must be maintained. Certainly all three features, but the last especially, is repeatedly mentioned in PBA confessional and epistolary literature and refers to strict application of Calvinist doctrine and discipline. The solution for these congregations unable to organize as “particular” churches appeared to be a quasi-presbyterian association “holding the separate churches together and supporting the weaker

³⁰As late as 1732, the Welsh Baptist Church of the Great Valley (founded 1711) considered itself “the branch of the Church of Christ at Pennypeck.”

³¹Thomas, *American Baptist Heritage in Wales, Part One*, p. 55.

³²Cited in Joshua Thomas, *A History Of The Baptist Association From The Year 1650, To The Year 1790, Shewing The Times And Places Of Their Annual Meetings, Whether In Wales, London, Or Bristol, Etc. Including Several Other Interesting Articles* (London: n.p., 1795), pp. 7–8.

ones.”³³ This was generally the pattern followed by the PBA throughout its early history. Therefore, the word “church” must be taken in context. Sometimes the church may be regarded as a united group of congregations supervised by a maternal or founding church, or the reference could be to a single congregation. One thing is clear: in early Welsh, as with later PBA history, decisions normally made by local congregations were often assumed by an association led by a few ministers whose opinions held sway.³⁴

After the Restoration of British monarchy in 1660, all Welsh Baptists were severely persecuted, lost their positions, and many sought refuge in America. One of these was John Myles who founded the first Baptist church in Massachusetts at Rehobeth in 1663. Those who stayed in Wales and persevered were unable to resume associational meetings until passage of the Toleration Act under William and Mary in 1689. After that date, several Welsh Baptists freely traveled to the annual Baptist association centered in Bristol until 1700 when they established their own permanent assembly. They then commenced the writing of circular letters to constituent churches, a regular practice of the PBA, many of whose membership came from Welsh Baptist churches.³⁵ After the removal of John Myles to America and the passage of time, the Welsh churches became more independent and democratic in polity. The congregation at Ilston (relocated at Swansea), still highly respected, lost its hierarchical status and simply became one of many Baptist churches proliferating throughout South Wales. Her daughter churches became self-governing sisters with their own ministers and policies.³⁶ Yet dependence on a hierarchical body was not

³³T. M. Bassett, *The Welsh Baptists* (Swansea, Wales: Ilston House, 1977), p. 25.

³⁴Other early British Baptist associations undoubtedly contributed to the PBA pattern. B. R. White cites records of the Abingdon (1652), Irish (1653), Somerset (1653), and Midlands (1655), which, he writes, provided “a body of case-law for the guidance of their people” (*Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales, and Ireland to 1660*, 3 parts [London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1971–1974], 2.53). Somerset apparently introduced the practices of answering queries of member churches and offering answers to them in circular letters, measures also adopted by the PBA. However, while the PBA was decisive in its responses, it rarely used the more severe language of Somerset, e.g., “we judge...” (see *ibid.*, 2:54–109).

³⁵Whitley mentions several other similarities between British associationalism and the PBA, such as length and number of sessions, use of a moderator, number of sermons, submission of queries for solution (usually on points of discipline)—practices replicated in the PBA (“Associational Life till 1815,” p. 26).

³⁶The weaning away from a “mother” church into separate congregations was the goal of Welsh Baptists as reflected in the 1794 report of the South West Association: “Agreed, To continue in our connexion the churches of Priory-street, Carmarthen, and Fsynnon-Henry, as they separated with affection.... That, in general, as an Association, we judge it right for churches consisting of several branches to divide into separate societies, or churches, as far as it may be convenient, in order to be nearer the pattern of the New Testament” (*Baptist Annual Register*, ed. John Rippon, 10 [April

abandoned. On the contrary, even after being weaned from mother churches such as Ilston, Welsh Baptists relied on their associations for direction and discipline. Oversight was transferred from a central church to a centralized association.³⁷ This associational model of oversight and paternal care of component churches, articulated in the London confessions and established in England and Wales, appears to be the pattern followed by the PBA in its early history.

PARENTAL STATUS OF THE PHILADELPHIA ASSOCIATION

Evidence of Welsh centralized polity abounds in the minutes of PBA meetings, circular letters, and in the annual written reports of member churches. Although declaring the PBA should not be considered “a superior judicature...having...superintendency over the churches,” Baptists nevertheless believed that when meeting as a deliberative body, the PBA had “a very considerable power in their hands,”³⁸ and practically functioned as a denominational head. It is true that the PBA referred to itself as an advisory not a judicatory body, but its counsel was considered authoritative. Resolutions to queries from local churches had the effect of determining their outcome. Shurden writes, “Paradoxically, a Baptist association exerted more power over local churches by means of its advisory functions, than through any other means.”³⁹ The reason for this is that the PBA was an autonomous organization which had the power to censure member churches and exclude those who did not heed its advice. This is implied in the very first meeting of the PBA in 1707.

It was...concluded, that if any difference shall happen between any member and the church he belongs unto, and they cannot agree, then the person so grieved may, at the general meeting, appeal to the brethren of the several congregations, and with such as they shall nominate, to decide the difference; that the church and the person so grieved do *fully acquiesce* in their determination.⁴⁰

1795]: 179).

³⁷By mid-18th century Baptists in Wales had grown sufficiently to support three associations: South West, South East, and North. For examples of how these associations functioned in relation to their member churches, one may consult Joshua Thomas, *A History Of The Baptist Association*, and John Rippon, ed., *Baptist Annual Register* from 1791 through 1795.

³⁸Walter B. Shurden, *Associationalism Among Baptists in America: 1707–1814* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), p. 125, citing Benjamin Griffith, “Essay on the Power and Duty of an Association of Churches,” in *PBA Minutes*, p. 61.

³⁹Shurden, *Associationalism Among Baptists in America*, p. 135.

⁴⁰*PBA Minutes*, p. 25, emphasis added.

Moreover, what was normally an exclusive right of the local church, i.e., the determination of its membership, was indirectly controlled by the PBA. For example, the PBA ruled that it would receive no church which admitted into its membership a paedo-Baptist or anyone denying unconditional election, original sin, and perseverance of the saints.⁴¹ Obviously, this meant that if a Baptist church wanted to be a member of the PBA it had to adopt the same requirements for its own membership. Likewise, the administration of church discipline and the selection of ministers, normal functions of the local church, were frequently determined by PBA action.⁴² If the PBA advised a course of discipline for an errant church member or pronounced against the suitability of a pastoral candidate, the affected congregation nearly always complied. The PBA even decided that “an appeal from any member of the associated churches or from one excommunicated from any said churches, may be made to the Association” since, “in some cases they may...suspend their prerogatives.”⁴³ Conscious of the conflict it had created in preempting the jurisdiction of the local church, the PBA later rescinded the legal term “appeal” and substituted “advice,” but the semantic change did not affect the result. Individual pastors and members continued appealing directly to the PBA for resolution of local church disputes, a practice they believed was perfectly compatible with their confession of faith and yet seemed to oppose the Baptist belief of local church regulation of such matters.⁴⁴

There are at least three reasons why member churches were so ready to conform to associational decisions. First, they were willing to defer to ministers of intellectual and spiritual stature whose wisdom they considered an expression of God’s will. Second, a majority decision would exert pressure to conform. Theron Chastain writes,

Actions of the association were enforced by social pressures strong enough to secure almost universal compliance. When a church was brought under criticism of its fellow Baptists, it took the necessary steps to get back in order. Seldom did a church cut itself off and try to go its independent way.⁴⁵

And third, the risk of being dropped from membership and forfeiting the assistance which the PBA afforded its members encouraged compliance.⁴⁶ Associational policies would serve as a doctrinal and

⁴¹Ibid., p. 147.

⁴²Ibid. pp. 148–50.

⁴³*PBA Minutes*, pp. 101–2.

⁴⁴Shurden, *Associationalism Among Baptists in America*, pp. 155–56.

⁴⁵“The Dynamics of American Baptist Denominational Life,” *Foundations* 4 (October 1961): 296.

⁴⁶Shurden, *Associationalism Among Baptists in America*, pp. 146–50.

moral safeguard but at the expense of local church autonomy. It is apparent, therefore, that denominational life resided in the association not the congregation.⁴⁷

Circular letters to member churches often assumed a paternal tone. Indeed, their style was almost apostolic. In 1731, “the elders, ministers, and messengers...met in Association at Philadelphia” addressed the respective congregations with the admonition

that you endeavour to provoke one another to love and good works. Consider seriously, dearly beloved, that our Master will come the rounds to view his servants, and woe then to the slothful and loitering. Therefore, bestir yourselves, be close and diligent, everyone according to his work in the vineyard, lest ye be found unprofitable. Prize your privileges and admire your dignities; you are the redeemed of the Lord, therefore be not earthly minded; you are the children of the King of Zion, walk as such.⁴⁸

Required reports by member churches at annual PBA meetings acknowledged a subordinate relationship. These letters provide valuable information regarding the numerical status and spiritual health of the churches, but they also reflect a sense of doctrinal accountability and denominational loyalty, expressed in fraternal and even paternal language. Since member churches were expected to subscribe to the approved confessional standards of the PBA, the salutation portion of their annual reports reaffirmed doctrinal commitment. The First Baptist Church at Newtown (PA) provides a typical example:

The Church of Christ at Newtown holding believers baptism, the doctrines of election, special vocation, and final perseverance of the Saints, etc. Send greeting—To the ministers, elders & other messengers of the several churches of the same faith and gospel order, in Pennsylvania, the Jerseys and States adjacent—to meet in Association at Hopewell October the 13th 1778.⁴⁹

Churches wishing to affirm laying on of hands would usually indicate this in their opening statement as well. One such example is that of the First Baptist Church of Wilmington, Delaware.

⁴⁷Winthrop Hudson writes that, after the American Revolution, various proposals were made to form a national denomination; these proved unsuccessful. The reason, he states, is that the PBA “continued to assume many of the responsibilities which should have been shouldered by the denomination as a whole...and other Associations...were quite content to let the Philadelphia Association do this for them” (“Stumbling Into Disorder,” *Foundations* 1 [April 1958]: 45–46). Prior to 1814 and the formation of the Triennial Convention the PBA *was* the denomination.

⁴⁸*PBA Minutes*, pp. 31–32.

⁴⁹Newtown Church letter to the PBA, 3 October 1778 (Records, Philadelphia Baptist Association, RG #201, Box 1, archived collection [Valley Forge, PA: American Baptist Historical Society]), hereafter cited as PBA Records.

The church of Jesus Christ at Wilmington holding Believers Baptism by Immersion, *Imposition of Hands*, the doctrine of the Trinity of persons in one divine essence, Particular Election, and redemption by Christ, final Perseverance of the saints in faith and Holiness....⁵⁰

One may draw an unmistakable inference from these epistolary salutations: member churches were seeking parental approval regarding their belief and behavior. To be accepted by the association, a Baptist church would have to endorse the doctrines of grace and affirm believer's baptism by immersion. Recurring phrases, such as "we continue in the faith" and "we maintain the order we were established in" were designed to reassure the PBA of abiding faithfulness to confessional standards. Commitment to orthodoxy facilitated unity among PBA's member churches, and even when threatened by disagreement over non-essentials, such as laying on of hands, harmony was restored through amicable resolution facilitated by the PBA.

Appreciation for doctrinal adherence is a frequent refrain in associational correspondence. In 1782, the Southampton Baptist Church (Bucks County, PA) reflected the consensus of her sister churches when commending the PBA for the practice of expounding on key elements of its confession in circulatory letters.

The letters we have received from you these several years past on the Important Truths of the Gospel, command our highest approbation. Your last upon God's Covenant, is, in our opinion, a clear, and consistent Illustration of the article of our Faith. We thank you much for those Labors of Love, and faithful Endeavors to hold up the Truth of the Gospel in their Purity, especially at a time when Deceivers prevail and their baneful Errors spread so dearly an Influence.⁵¹

Doctrinal orthodoxy not only secured associational allegiance, it was the primary attraction for several churches seeking membership in the PBA, as attested by the Pittstown (PA) Baptist church.

We have had so much opportunity of informing ourselves both of the Doctrine and Discipline that you maintain we are fully satisfied your Standing is the order of the Gospel. We believe that a Christian fellowship ought to be supported through all the churches of Christ. We see many & great advantages arising from the Visible Union into which we also Desire admittance if you find us in Gospel order.⁵²

To meet in association was considered an indispensable duty even in time of war.⁵³ In 1778, the Southampton church lamented the fact

⁵⁰Wilmington Church letter to the PBA, 20 September 1787 (PBA Records), emphasis added.

⁵¹Southampton Church letter to the PBA, 20 October 1782 (PBA Records).

⁵²Pittstown Church letter to PBA, 15 September 1787 (PBA Records).

⁵³The only year the PBA did not meet was 1777 due to the occupation of Philadelphia by British troops.

that due to “our vicinity to the Enemy [the British redcoats] during their stay in Philadelphia,” public worship was prevented. As was the case with several Baptist churches during the American Revolution, Southampton’s pastor “entered himself a chaplain in the Continental Army...so that we have had but 2 or 3 Transient sermons this summer, and have no prospect of his return, or being better served. However in this, as well as all other turns of Providence, we think it our Duty to be Content.”⁵⁴ Such stressful times were often translated into a written appeal to the PBA for prayer and pulpit supply. Abraham Cherry, clerk of the Baptist church meeting in Coram, NY requested ministerial assistance “as often as you can possibly do.”⁵⁵ The Baptist church at Baltimore wrote the PBA in gratitude for sending messengers whose teachings “God was pleased to open our Eyes to see the Dangerous Circumstances we was in on which account we cannot be sufficiently thankful to God; and now we hope we hate and Renounce our former principles and Covenant”—a reference to the Arminian teachings and baptism “by one Paul Palmer.”⁵⁶ On the basis of the Philadelphia Confession, the church was “constituted into a Regular [Baptist] Church,” after which they professed, “through the Riches of Divine Goodness we live in peace and love among ourselves and Meet together as often as we can” to read sermons, sing psalms, and pray.⁵⁷ But they would not be satisfied until they had their own pastor. “Dear Brethren,” they write, “pray for us and send us a minister to Settle amongst us as Soon as possible you can.”⁵⁸

In addition to doctrinal commitment and ministerial dependence, member churches and even other associations gave deference to the PBA by acknowledging its paternal role in various ecclesiastical matters. At nearly every annual meeting the PBA would pass resolutions on queries submitted by church messengers. Frequently, the PBA would form committees to arbitrate church disputes or suggest a means of financial assistance to destitute congregations or ministers. In every case there was the assumption of an authority granted it by constituents. For example, in 1782 the Philadelphia church conformed to the PBA’s “unanimous recommendation” to excommunicate forty-six

delphia by British troops.

⁵⁴Southampton Church letter to PBA, 14 October 1778 (PBA Records).

⁵⁵Coram Church letter to PBA, 3 October 1790 (PBA Records).

⁵⁶Palmer founded what became the first Free Will Baptist church in the South at Chowan, NC, in 1727.

⁵⁷This practice was in accordance with earlier PBA advice to the Brandywine (NJ) church in 1723 when they had no minister: “When they have none to carry on the work of preaching, that they read a chapter [from the Bible], sing a psalm, and go to prayer” (*PBA Minutes*, p. 27).

⁵⁸Baltimore Church letter to PBA, 3 October 1755 (PBA Records).

members “who refused signing our Protest against universal Restoration.” The church planned to dismiss anyone else who persisted in “the dangerous heresy” of universalism “previous to which we Intreat your Concurrence in what we have already done.”⁵⁹ In 1790 the Baltimore church wrote, “We desire, Brethren, to be the subjects of your Care,”⁶⁰ which suggests a spiritual oversight from outside the local assembly. With the approval of the Philadelphia church, their clerk, George W. Ingols, sent the PBA a copy of the minutes relating to discipline of a belligerent member who finally and publicly confessed his fault. That his repentance occurred *four years* after the discipline did not prevent Ingols from notifying the PBA of the details!⁶¹

When member churches were sufficient in number to form other associations more convenient to them, they would humbly request dismissal with the understanding that they would join the new group *only* if the PBA granted permission.⁶² Thus, quite literally, daughter associations were born out of the PBA and would naturally follow its basic doctrinal and ecclesiastical pattern which had been learned from the British Baptists. In fact, these associations welcomed messengers from the PBA, allowing them the same voting privileges as regular members. And in their letters to the PBA there is an unmistakable tone of respect, even of acquiescence, to a superior. Indeed, the PBA often assumed the role of mother or at least older sister in *expecting* regular reports from other Baptist associations. Yet there is no hint of resentment or jealousy from the “lesser” associations.⁶³ For example, the Kettocton Association, headquartered in Virginia, reported in 1784 that it had added several churches which had “profest their hearty consent to the wholesome doctrines Contained [in the Philadelphia Confession],” with the assurance that this “will give you satisfaction.” The question arises—why should an association located in the South be concerned about satisfying another association removed from them by a great many miles and a significantly different culture? The simple answer is that when Kettocton was organized in 1766, three of its four founding churches were previous members of the PBA,⁶⁴ and still retained an

⁵⁹Philadelphia Church letter to PBA, 22 October 1782 (PBA Records).

⁶⁰Baltimore Church letter to PBA, 24 September 1790 (PBA Records).

⁶¹Philadelphia Church letter to PBA, 13 October 1791 (PBA Records).

⁶²Of the many examples of this in the PBA Records, see Hartford County Church (MD) letter to PBA, 2 October 1794. The Hartford church was requesting transfer of membership to the newly formed Maryland Baptist Association.

⁶³William Wright Barnes notes that the correspondence between Baptist associations was “the first evidence of an incipient national consciousness” and aided denominational cohesiveness among Baptists (“The Development of Nationalism Among American Baptists,” *Chronicle* 1 [July 1938]: 112).

⁶⁴Benedict, *General History of the Baptist Denomination in America*, 2:34. The three churches were Mill Creek, Smith’s Creek, and Kettocton. The fourth church,

abiding loyalty to that organization. Such a response seems to be more than a mere act of courtesy; it suggests compliance and assent. Further proof of this can be seen in a conflict involving the New York Baptist Association which had been trying to resolve a dispute between two churches in New York City. In 1790 a sizeable group had pulled out of First Baptist over a doctrinal issue, resulting in the formation of Second Baptist Church. The latter church had argued their case before the PBA: “We regret the Absolute Necessity we are under to Complain to this Association of Unchristian Unbrotherly treatment we have received from our Sister Church in this City.” An additional comment was sure to spark the attention of PBA membership:

Further we believe it can be made [to] appear, they have...departed from the faith, both in Doctrine and Discipline, as set forth in the *Baptist Confession of faith Adopted by this Association*. Therefore we pray this Association to take these Several Matters into Serious Consideration, and take such measure as shall tend to detect Error—Cause truth to shine, and Give us such relief as You in Your Wisdom shall think most proper.⁶⁵

When the New York Baptist Association was formed in 1793 (with PBA approval), it inherited the conflict and understandably sought PBA’s counsel. But it is the filial tone of their wording which illustrates my point:

We feel ourselves under many obligations, to acknowledge the *paternal* council given us respecting the difficulties in which we are involved with regard to the Second Church in New York...and assure you that we shall look up to you with thankfulness for every kind intimation for our direction in this and every future trial; and that we feel a *filial respect and reverence for our fathers and Brethren* of the Philadelphia association, to which they are peculiarly entitled, from the long and endearing connection we have enjoyed together with them.⁶⁶

The next year the Baptist Church at Wilmington entreated the PBA in the same manner: “permit us to look up to our *fathers* in the Church of Christ for spiritual instruction...[being] still...interested in your wise counsel.”⁶⁷

Broad Run, had not been a PBA member. When Morgan Edwards visited churches of Kettocton in 1772, he recorded that “the sentiments and plan are exactly the same with those of the mother association of philadelphia” (*Materials Towards A History of the Baptists*, 2:71). See also, William Fristof, *A Concise History of the Kettocton Baptist Association* (Staunton, VA: William Gilman Lyford, 1808), p. 6.

⁶⁵Second New York Church letter to PBA, 3 October 1790 (PBA Records), emphasis added.

⁶⁶New York Baptist Association letter to PBA, 22 May 1793 (PBA Records), emphasis added.

⁶⁷Wilmington Church letter to PBA, 7 October 1794 (PBA Records), emphasis added.

As we have already noted, the PBA, under certain circumstances, permitted individuals to bring complaints directly to its attention. Sister Martha Howell bemoaned the neglect of her church regarding a chronic illness, evidently the result of an illegitimate pregnancy. She pleads with the “fathers” of the PBA to supply her with a physician.⁶⁸ We have no record of a response to the request, but the very fact that it was sent at all speaks volumes about the PBA’s paternal reputation. Another complaint came from pastor Joseph Powell of Konoloway (PA) Baptist Church. It seems that a younger minister had come into the neighborhood and gathered another smaller congregation over the objection of a frustrated and possibly jealous Powell. “Small weak churches,” he protests, cannot help the “union, strength and good order” of the denomination. “Churches, under such circumstances, cannot reasonably be expected to keep up that Order & Decorum, which becomes the Dignity of the House of God.”⁶⁹ No doubt he was disappointed when learning of the PBA’s decision to admit the new church into membership even with the added caveat disapproving “of multiplying churches by dividing those already established, without evident necessity; and also, of any one minister by himself undertaking to constitute a church.”⁷⁰ We may assume that Powell accepted the decision from the fact that we have no record of further appeal and that his church continued to be included on the PBA’s membership roster.

What seems apparent from the PBA’s own recorded minutes and associational correspondence is that member churches considered themselves a sorority when relating to each other, but when messengers from those churches gathered together in association, they were regarded by those same churches as a paternal body deserving affection and even submission. There was the inbred British belief that ministerial counsels, although constituted by its member churches and representative of them, may nevertheless exert such a commanding respect that its advice takes on the character of prescription. Evidently member churches were willing to surrender a certain measure of autonomy for the overall good of doctrinal integrity and ecclesiastical unity fostered by the association.

A RATIONALE FOR THE BAPTIST ASSOCIATION

Obviously, associationalism was very important to early Baptists. Churches would form associations as soon as they were able to support them. They were normally developed from loose connections of

⁶⁸Martha Howell letter to PBA, 4 July 1777 (PBA Records). Since the PBA did not meet in 1777, we have no record in the minutes of this request. But considering its nature, it is highly unlikely that it would have been handled in session.

⁶⁹Joseph Powell letter to PBA, 16 April 1792 (PBA Records).

⁷⁰*PBA Minutes*, p. 281.

branch congregations—seven centered in London (1644, developing into the General Assembly by 1689), three connected to Ilston (1650, developing into the Welsh Association by 1700), and five connected to Pennepek (1689–98, beginning the Philadelphia Association in 1707). These three groups mark the beginnings of British Particular Baptist associationalism. As we have seen, the last of them—the PBA—was patterned after the first two groups: its doctrinal beliefs drawn from the Second London Baptist Confession, and its polity mostly from the Welsh Baptists which composed the majority of the PBA during the colonial period.⁷¹ In order to properly evaluate the practice of associationalism as a means of connectionalism and interdependence of Baptist churches in early America, we would do well to consider the reasons these Baptists themselves used to justify such an arrangement. For this treatment I am especially indebted to two sources: Francis Sacks's ecumenical analysis of the Philadelphia Baptist tradition cited earlier and the writings of Baptist historian Walter Shurden, whose study of Baptist associationalism is highly regarded.⁷²

When the PBA voted in 1742 to adopt the 1689 Second London Confession, they also agreed to annex a short treatise of discipline to be prepared by Welsh Baptists Jenkin Jones and Benjamin Griffith. The latter accomplished the bulk of the work which was printed by Benjamin Franklin and accepted at the 1743 associational meeting. The treatise was completely devoted to detailing the accepted practices of Baptist congregations and their associations. The last article treats the various reasons for associations of churches.

Particular Churches have to do with doubtful and difficult Matters, or Differences in Point of Doctrine or Administration (like the Church of Antioch of old) wherein either the Churches in general are concerned, or any one Church, in their Peace, Union of Edification; or any Member or Members of a Church are injured, in or by any Proceeding in Censures not agreeable to Gospel-rule and Order; it is according to the Mind of Christ, that many Churches holding Communion together, should meet by their Messengers and Delegates to consider of, and to give Advice in or about such Matters in Difference; and their Sentiments to be reported to all the Churches concerned: And such Messengers and Delegates, convened in the Name of Christ, by the voluntary Consent of the several Churches in such mutual Communion, may declare & determine of the Mind of the Holy Ghost, revealed in Scripture, concerning Things in

⁷¹Although as I indicated earlier in note 34, other English Baptist associations undoubtedly played an influential role in the organization of the PBA. I have concentrated on Welsh associationalism for contributing the principal functional model and the English for providing the exclusive doctrinal basis for the PBA.

⁷²Shurden has written several articles derived from his most significant work on the subject: *Associationalism Among Baptists in America: 1707–1814*. This was originally Shurden's Th.D. dissertation presented to New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in 1967.

Difference; and may decree the Observation of Things that are true and necessary, because revealed and appointed in the Scripture. And the Churches will do well to receive, own and observe such Determinations, on the Evidence and Authority of the Mind of the Holy Ghost in them, as in Acts 15.29. Yet such Delegates thus assembled, are not intrusted or armed with any coercive Power, or any superior Jurisdiction over the Churches concerned, so as to impose their Determinations on them or their Officers, under the Penalty of Excommunication, of the like.⁷³

From this description we may discern a rationale for associations which may be delineated as practical, biblical, and theological.⁷⁴

Practical Reasons—“concerned [for]...Peace [and] Union of Edification”

The PBA arose, as did most Baptist associations, to promote peace and unity among the churches. Attacked from without and threatened within, these early Baptists “united in order to preserve and perpetuate their distinctive...witness.”⁷⁵ Quite simply, for them associationalism was a matter of survival. During the colonial period, established religious groups considered these “re-baptizers” as Protestant renegades, fomenters of discord and religious sedition. Left to themselves as local congregations, they could have become easy prey for opponents wishing to destroy their communion. An association of churches could provide a stronger body of defense. Petty church disputes or differences in doctrine could also jeopardize the peace of the churches. Newly-formed congregations, while possessed with scriptural authority, were not always practically equipped with the ability to decide controversial questions. Their recourse was to a body of ministerial counselors whose wisdom was considered “the mind of Christ” and whose guidance was equivalent to his will. Specifically, the PBA could “set in order the things wanting in the churches” better than the churches could accomplish on their own. The association could use its authority to maintain uniformity of doctrine and practice, both crucial to the spiritual health of the churches. It provided a structured means of relief by which congregations could better accomplish their various ministries, such as new church plants, financial assistance, pulpit supply, ministerial placement, and evangelistic outreach. And significantly, the PBA could function in its most important capacity as

⁷³A *Short Treatise of Church Discipline* (Philadelphia: Benjamin Franklin, 1743), Art. 62.

⁷⁴See Sacks, *Philadelphia Baptist Tradition*, pp. 62–64, 531–50 and Shurden, *Associationalism Among Baptists in America: 1707–1814*, pp. 69–111. My arrangement of categories is inverted from Sacks, who follows Shurden, but the treatment is essentially the same.

⁷⁵Walter B. Shurden, “The Associational Principle, 1707–1814: Its Rationale,” *Foundations* 21 (July–September 1978): 219.

advisor to churches and other associations, warning them against disorderly preachers, admonishing them toward godliness, exhorting them to maintain strict discipline, informing them about relevant denominational events, and keeping them focused on Bible doctrine and Baptist distinctives. In answering queries and settling disputes, the PBA would often appeal to their confessional statements. But some troublesome subjects had not been addressed and no precedent established. Questions such as what to do with members who are frequently absent from communion, the propriety of preaching without ordination, whether women should be allowed to vote in church, and whether foot washing should be practiced must have taxed the collective wisdom of PBA ministers.⁷⁶ But the reasonable decisions it issued served to insure denominational uniformity and harmony, thereby justifying its creation as a practical necessity.

Another practical rationale often used to justify the Baptist association was that it functioned much like the local church only on a larger scale. After sixty years of service to the churches under its care, the PBA described its relationship to them as analogous to the local assembly and its membership:

A long course of experience and observation has taught us to have the highest sense of the advantages which accrue from Associations; for as particular members are collected together and united in one body, which we call a particular Church, to answer those ends and purposes which could not be accomplished by any single member; So a collection and union of Churches into one associational body, may easily be conceived capable of answering those still greater purposes, which any particular church could not be equal to.⁷⁷

Associations were therefore an expedient measure for handling ecclesiastical problems and promoting stability and consistency for a young denomination. As Shurden remarks, these Baptists had no clear scriptural mandate for establishing associations. “They simply desired a workable plan for solving problems common to all the churches.... [The associations] were designed to meet needs. They were organized because of their advantages. One may debate whether this *should* be the use; one can hardly debate that it has been the case.”⁷⁸ Practical reasons by and large dictated the formation of Baptist associations.⁷⁹

⁷⁶*PBA Minutes*, pp. 40, 50, 53, 119.

⁷⁷*Minutes of the Warren Baptist Association (1767)*, p. 14, cited in Shurden, “The Associational Principle, 1707–1814,” p. 222.

⁷⁸Shurden, “The Associational Principle, 1707–1814,” p. 222.

⁷⁹A prominent leader in the PBA, Morgan Edwards, expressed what was undoubtedly the majority view of Regular Baptists: “By it [the PBA] the baptists are become a respectable body of people...for which reason we could wish that all baptist churches in America...were to form themselves into such associated bodies in their respective provinces” (“Narrative of the Proceedings of the Philadelphia Baptist

Biblical Reasons—“determine...the Mind of the Holy Ghost, revealed in Scripture”

When James Manning (1738–1791), first president of Rhode Island College, was attempting to justify the creation of New England’s Warren Association in 1767, he stated that it “should consist of men knowing and judicious, particularly in the Scriptures. The reasons,” he said, “are obvious”:

Such men are the fittest to represent communities who profess the Scriptures to be the only rule of faith and practice in religious matters, and who expect that every advice, opinion, or direction they receive from an association be Scriptural. They should be skilled and expert in the laws of their God, as counselors are in the laws of the land; for that is the ground of the church’s application to them.⁸⁰

Manning was expressing the sentiment of most Regular Baptists. He was saying in effect that for a Baptist association to be productive it must be scriptural in its deliberations and advice, that it would be successful only to the degree that its leadership was biblical. Manning correctly argued for scriptural *wisdom* of association members, but the question remains as to the scriptural *warrant* for the actual founding of an association. Did the Bible authorize it? This is where argumentation is rather tenuous.

Following the custom of most Protestant statements of faith, the *Philadelphia Confession* cited scriptural proof texts in its margins. To support “Churches holding communion together,” the confession referred to Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23, and 25. These, of course, are references to the Jerusalem Council which met to decide a conflict between Jewish and Gentile converts regarding salvation requirements. Once again, following the example of their British brethren, the PBA used the same passage to justify its existence.⁸¹ This is evident in an approved essay written by Benjamin Griffith in 1749 to answer objections by critics of associationalism. He writes,

Association,” in *Customs of Primitive Churches, Or, A Set of Propositions Relative to the Name, Materials, Constitution, Power, Officers, Ordinances, Rites, Business, Worship, Discipline, Government etc. of a Church...and Historical Narratives of the Manner in Which Most of Them Have Been Reduced to Practice* [Philadelphia: Andrew Stewart, 1768], p. 110).

⁸⁰“Sentiments Touching An Association,” *Warren Association Minutes* (1767), cited in Reuben Aldridge Guild, *Early History of Brown University, Including the Life, Times, and Correspondence of President Manning, 1756–1791* (reprint of 1897 ed., New York: Arno Press, 1980), p. 76.

⁸¹Both the *First* and *Second London Baptist Confessions* made reference to Acts 15 in support of inter-church communion. See article 46 in the former and chapter 26 in the latter (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, pp. 168, 289).

We judge those things in the 15th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles to be imitable by an Association.... Consistent therewith, the practice of after ages is found to be; when, because they had no council, synod, or association to convene, of course they called a council, in order to make head against any error or disorders, when in any particular church, such things grew too big for a particular church peaceably to determine.⁸²

Therefore, using the precedent of the Jerusalem Council, the Regular Baptists felt perfectly free to convene an association to treat difficult issues in the church, offer resolutions, and distribute circular letters. They also emphasized the manner in which the Jerusalem decisions were implemented—not by apostolic coercion but by ecclesiastical consensus. Thus, the Baptists reminded themselves of the *advisory* role of the council. However, while they concentrated on the precedent of the Jerusalem Council, they conveniently overlooked its exceptional nature—it was not meant to be a *permanent* association. The PBA, on the other hand, assumed an ongoing regulative role unsupported by Acts 15.⁸³ Perhaps a more appropriate means of justifying associationalism for these Baptists was the correlation of Scripture passages stressing unity of the body of Christ, such as Ephesians 4:4–6, Matthew 23:8, Romans 12:5, and 1 Corinthians 1:10.⁸⁴ But even these gave no specific instructions for the formation of associations as a means promoting unity. The matter really came down to using associationalism as an expedient means for Baptists to observe what was clear in Scripture—the wisdom of a “multitude of counselors” (Prov 11:14), the numerous examples of inter-church relationships in the New Testament, and the frequent references to mutual admonition. As Shurden remarks, although Baptists justified associationalism “based upon common assent to the Lordship of Christ....[they]...occasionally, however, came dangerously near equating the spiritual unity of churches in the New Testament with the organizational unity of a Baptist association.”⁸⁵

⁸²“Essay on the Power and Duty of an Association of Churches,” in *PBA Minutes*, p. 62.

⁸³Interestingly, Sacks mentions that in Manning’s original arguments in support of associationalism he used Acts 15 but in a later revision eliminated any reference to the passage. This was probably due to the rejection by the Coventry (MA) Church “that that chapter, or any other sentence in the Bible, supports a classical government of the Church or churches of Christ” (Coventry Church to Warren Association, 13 September 1768, Warren Association Minutes, cited in Sacks, *Philadelphia Baptist Tradition*, pp. 196–97).

⁸⁴Shurden, “The Associational Principle, 1707–1814,” p. 213.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, p. 215.

Theological Reasons—“have to do with...Differences in Point of Doctrine or Administration”

Regular Baptists in colonial America held in tension a two-fold concept of the church: it was both universal and local. Chapter twenty-seven of the *Philadelphia Confession* states in its very first article that

the catholic or universal church, which, with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace, may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.⁸⁶

The confession then proceeds to discuss the nature and duties of local churches who are called by Christ out of this world, whom he commands “to walk together in particular societies, or churches, for their mutual edification, and the due performance of that public worship, which He requireth of them.”⁸⁷ Since these societies are united to the same Lord and observe the same ordinances and regulations of belief and behavior, they should mutually support one another, as did those churches mentioned in the New Testament. Therefore, while maintaining their independence as local assemblies, they nevertheless should extend their communion to sister churches “for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification.”⁸⁸ The Regular Baptists interpreted this interdependence of local churches as justification for formal associations wherein they could realize and maintain what they considered the theological ideal of Christian unity and doctrinal integrity. Simply, if all believers following the same pattern of regulative worship as given in the New Testament are one in Christ, the association was a viable expression of that oneness. This oneness was frequently celebrated with the Lord’s Supper at PBA gatherings,⁸⁹ admittance of members of other associations to full voting privileges,⁹⁰ and sermons by selected ministers designed to promote theological solidarity.

Additionally, the Regular Baptists believed that the association was the best forum to consider differences in doctrine that would affect the entire denomination. A case in point would be the controversial issue

⁸⁶*A 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. Adopted by the Baptist Association met at Philadelphia, Sept. 25. 1742* (Philadelphia: B. Franklin, 1743), 27.1.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 27.2.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, article 14.

⁸⁹*PBA Minutes*, p. 30.

⁹⁰In 1780, Oliver Hart and his company from the Charleston Association “were admitted by the [Philadelphia] Association to the full privilege of members” (*PBA Minutes*, p. 169).

mentioned earlier of laying hands on newly baptized converts as a requirement for church membership. This practice had been debated in Wales, and it continued to stir controversy in America where it became a test of fellowship and the cause of church splits. Morgan Edwards cites an example from the Welsh Tract Church's record book:

But we could not be in fellowship (at the Lord's table) with our brethren of Pennepek and Philadelphia, because they did not hold to the laying on of hands: true; some of them believed in the ordinance, but neither preached it up nor practised it; and when we moved to Welsh Tract and left 22 of our members at Pennepek, and took some of their with us, the difficulty increased.⁹¹

The PBA had no problem affirming the requirement of laying hands on pastoral candidates,⁹² but they were divided over the practice applied to church members. Eventually they agreed to take a moderating position as indicated in a 1783 resolution:

7. In answer to the query from Newtown church: Whether laying on of hands to be an ordinance of the gospel to be administered to all baptized persons, or only in particular cases? we observe, that imposition of hands on baptized persons has been the general practice of the churches in union with this Association, and is still used by most of them; but it was *never considered by the Association as a bar of communion*. Resolved, That any person scrupling to submit thereto, *may be admitted to the fellowship of the church without it*.⁹³

After this pronouncement, member churches once again acquiesced to the PBA decision and eventually the practice died out altogether.⁹⁴

The strongest theological justification for associationalism was the safeguard of sound doctrine. The doctrines of sovereign grace must be preserved at all cost by the "good order" of the churches. The Regular Baptists believed that the association was the best means of assuring the maintenance of orthodoxy in the midst of a growing denomination. In every instance of recorded sessions, in the letters of correspondence between the associations, in circular letters issued to the member churches, and sermons by association ministers the PBA emphasized the fundamental doctrines of Scripture and sectarian distinctives as

⁹¹Edwards, *Materials Towards a History of The Baptists*, 2:6.

⁹²When the Philadelphia Baptist Church asked whether they could allow a visiting minister who had not been ordained with laying of hands to offer the ordinances, the PBA responded in the negative, citing Acts 13:2, 3; 14:23; Titus 1:5; and 1 Tim 4:14 (*PBA Minutes*, p. 30).

⁹³*PBA Minutes*, p. 194, emphasis added.

⁹⁴For further discussion on this issue with historical references, see Gerald L. Priest, "The Abel Morgans's Contribution to Baptist Ecclesiology in Colonial America," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 8 (Fall 2003): 49–68.

absolutely necessary to their continued existence and prosperity.⁹⁵ If apostolic doctrine was the sure foundation of the church, then its representatives must do all in their power to guarantee its preservation. Limiting membership in the PBA to only those churches which embraced Calvinist doctrine and Baptist beliefs would help achieve this purpose.

AN EVALUATION OF PHILADELPHIA BAPTIST ASSOCIATIONALISM

In his history of Brown University, Reuben Guild states that it was James “Manning’s wish to unite all the churches of his faith...in an association similar to the one in Philadelphia” in order “to promote their harmony and growth, to resist more successfully acts of oppression on the part of the ‘Standing Order’ in Massachusetts and Connecticut,” and to advance the interests of Rhode Island College over which he presided.⁹⁶ The proposal was not without opposition, however. Delegates from eleven New England churches gathered to discuss it in 1767, but only four of them “were ready for such a venture.”⁹⁷ There were two reasons for their hesitation: fear of usurpation by the association over the churches composing it and reluctance to follow precisely the PBA plan. The reluctant delegates had seen how the PBA had exerted a great deal of power over its members, even though claiming to be strictly an advisory council. In his proposed plan for what became the Warren Association, Manning had to reassure his fellow ministers that the new society would be “consistent with the independency and power of particular churches...utterly disclaiming superiority, jurisdiction, coercive right, and infallibility.”⁹⁸ But these were exactly the sentiments expressed in policy statements of the PBA. Indeed, the Warren Association plan differed little in substance from it. The Warren Association won the confidence of the New England Baptists initially because of persuasive leadership and eventually because of its usefulness. Guild writes,

By its means mutual acquaintance and harmony were promoted; the weak and the oppressed were relieved; errors in doctrine and in practice were exposed and guarded against; warnings against false teachers in religion were published; feeble and destitute flocks were provided with preachers; the College was materially aided and strengthened; students were encouraged to study for the ministry, and the Gospel was preached

⁹⁵For specific instances of PBA indoctrination among not only its own membership but throughout the denomination, see James Clark, *To Set Them in Order*, pp. 64–89.

⁹⁶*Early History of Brown University*, pp. 73–74.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*

in destitute places.⁹⁹

These purposes are nearly identical to those of the PBA and very similar to the pattern of Baptist associations in Britain. Member churches found that they could have a stronger voice in opposition to civil and religious harassment and promote church growth if united in an association having the same doctrine and discipline.

There is no question that the final authority for these early Baptist associations was the infallible Word of God, to which they made frequent and careful reference. It is understandable that they would form associations as a practical means to aid newly formed local congregations in implementing biblical truth. A vital part of that help came from the best wisdom available: denominational leaders well-versed in the Scriptures. PBA policy stated emphatically that functional authority resided in the local congregations, that “particular churches have full power and authority to transact all their own affairs, independent of any other church or churches.”¹⁰⁰ This did not mean they were independent of Christ nor of other members of his body, i.e., other congregations: they should obey *him* and work in harmony with *them*. But practically speaking, these functions often merged to where the voice of the association became that of Christ. It is a matter of the age old question of how to balance freedom with power in human association.¹⁰¹ The PBA, with the consent of its member churches, exerted an authoritative role over them. The PBA was very conscious of the power given it, and in most cases cautiously used it to facilitate the churches, rather than dictating to them. But the fact remains that the churches were willing to transfer prerogatives of self-government to a group they believed better able to handle difficult issues that they could have, and in several instances should have, handled. This approach became the mantra of the denominational convention—“we exist to do for the churches what they cannot do for themselves.” But when an association is given the role of decision-making, there often exists a fine line between the judicial and the advisory. Advice in the form of resolution can have the unintended *effect* of legislation simply when a deliberative body issues it and pressure is placed upon subjects to submit to it. This is inevitable when an ostensibly autonomous congregation voluntarily surrenders its decision-making prerogatives to a council outside of itself. It may retain the right of refusing submission to the decision made on its behalf, but run the potential risk of ostracism or expulsion.

Clearly, most of the early Baptists believed they were not

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁰⁰Samuel Jones, *A Treatise of Church Discipline, and a Directory. Done by Appointment of the Philadelphia Baptist Association* (Lexington, MA: T. Anderson, 1805), article 12.

¹⁰¹Handy, “The Philadelphia Tradition,” p. 45.

surrendering their distinctives but strengthening them by joining an association which would articulate and reinforce them, even as individual Christians strengthened their testimony by joining local assemblies. Of course, the analogy is not exact, since the New Testament does not mandate associations as it does local churches. But a healthy relationship, they believed, could be maintained, as expressed by a prominent Welsh constituent of the PBA:

As to our Discipline it is of an independent Nature we believing that Every Church or Congregation of Christians...hath power in and of themselves to determine and to put a final end to thire own Maters; yet we believe that a Church hath power in difficult Maters to send to a Sister Church or Churches of the Same denomination for advise and assistance for difficult cases: and further that as many Churches as conveniently...may assemble themselves to gather in an association; as a politick body to consider of maters Relateing to that body that may be to the Glory of God and the good of his Church in General and that Every Church hath power to send thire Ministers and Elders or some other Members as thire Mesengers and Representatives to such association they belong unto as often as necessity may Require or onest a year at least and this hath been our practice.¹⁰²

The question remains, however, whether an association is necessary. Indeed, cannot it actually be harmful? Benedict, being familiar with Baptist associations on both sides of the Atlantic, wisely commented that

Associations among the Baptists have arisen, in some cases, from necessity, in others from convenience, but in most from imitation. Their utility cannot be disputed; their powers are generally defined to be just none at all, and yet many fear that they may in time usurp too high a place.... When they are held and managed as assemblies for edification and councils of advice, no harm can possibly result to the churches from them; their independency, in the strictest sense of the word, may be maintained in an associate connexion. There is, however, in the human mind, an anxious desire for a court of appeal; and some Associations, by listening to the complaints of individuals, by interfering and deciding in the controversies of churches, have embarrassed their progress, and taken stands which they could not maintain, consistent with their advisory principles.... In such cases, all agree something should be done; but this something has never been clearly and satisfactorily defined. Some, because of these things, object to Associations altogether, as difficult in their management, dangerous in their consequences, and likely to do more hurt than good. It is oftener much easier to find fault with others than amend ourselves: those very persons, who object to Associations, form, notwithstanding, ecclesiastical combinations much of the same nature. As naturally as animals of the same species flock together, so will Christians of the same sentiments gather into churches, and churches of the same faith

¹⁰²Record Book of the Baptist Church in the Great Valley, Devon, PA, n.d.

and order form into combinations or Associations of some kind or other.... A duly organized church of Christ is the highest ecclesiastical tribunal on earth, from whose decisions there is no appeal. If Associations cannot be maintained without infringing upon this principle, they had better be given up: but those, who have been the longest concerned in them, and who are best qualified to give a judgment in the case, believe they can.¹⁰³

It appears that local church connectionalism via the association, with the tension of independence and interdependence, was successfully realized in the PBA. In other words, these Baptists believed they could and indeed had achieved a balance between the power of the association and the freedom of the local church. Harmony prevailed, discipline was enforced, and doctrine was maintained. In a colonial America, where Baptists were attempting to carve out a denominational niche in a developing pluralistic culture, the association served the Baptists well. The genius of the PBA was its doctrinally sound confessional theology to which all member churches had to subscribe. And the PBA was swift to expel any pastor or church from its ranks who embraced heresy. Associationalism had the advantage of keeping members focused on the very basis of its fellowship—doctrine. PBA leadership frequently and vocally reminded their churches that adhering to a sound confessional theology was the surest safeguard against error.

But in time the PBA lost its ability to provide an authoritative voice for orthodoxy. Orderly churches became disorderly due to the inroads of Arminianism, rationalism, and antinomianism. And what facilitated this change was a results-oriented revivalism which placed experience above doctrine.¹⁰⁴ Christianity that is zealous, experimental, and evangelistic without a deep concern for scriptural and theological correctness will degenerate over a period of time into apostasy.¹⁰⁵ With the weakening of confessionalism the PBA became vulnerable to modernism, began denying the doctrines it formerly affirmed, and subsequently lost its evangelistic zeal. One Reformed Baptist pastor laments that the PBA of today bears little resemblance to the PBA of the eighteenth century. “Many of the churches which were a part of the Philadelphia Baptist Association...are still in existence today, but they don’t teach the same doctrines, nor preach the same truths.”¹⁰⁶ The gospel of

¹⁰³Benedict, *General History of the Baptist Denomination*, 2:464.

¹⁰⁴Wayne A. Mack writes, “In revivalism, doctrine was unimportant. It was a person’s experience with Christ that really mattered” (“The Philadelphia Association,” in *The Ideal Church*, ed. Erroll Hulse [Sussex, England: Carey Publications, 1972], p. 62).

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, p. 46.

Christ was replaced with the social gospel, and wise leaders committed to the doctrines of grace and godliness were succeeded by social facilitators and ecumenical pluralists whose chief concern was human happiness rather than God's glory.

One may learn from the history of the PBA that confessions of faith are only as reliable as those who are supposed to uphold them—the local churches. And perhaps in this lesson we may observe at once a strength and a weakness of associationalism. As we have repeatedly noted, in such an arrangement, local churches must inevitably surrender a measure of autonomy to an advisory council who sets the denominational agenda. Advice often has the effect of law. Paternity succeeds fraternity. With the PBA and the other associations it spawned in colonial America, such a consensual arrangement worked to the mutual benefit of the churches doctrinally and practically. That is, it worked because faithful godly leaders relied on a good confession of faith. But when decisions are made by a council on behalf of a local church, it compromises to some degree the capability and responsibility of the local assembly to exercise a prerogative assigned to it by the New Testament. It is true that the local church may be compensated by such a loss with the gain of the many benefits an association provides. But is the price too costly? It can be if the leadership proves untrustworthy. And one may argue that this can be a problem in the local church just as it could be in the association. But history has proven beyond doubt that effective leaders of great institutions can sway public opinion, in this case, an entire denomination. What the early leaders of the PBA decided was remarkably beneficial to the Regular Baptists of early America. Such was the case because the leaders could be trusted as righteous advisers. When personal ambition or political maneuvering or, even worse, doctrinal compromise begins to govern their decisions and taint their advice, member churches will become spiritually weak and lose the candlestick of a once vibrant testimony. In short, Baptist associations can be wonderfully productive if submissive to the Word of God and servants of the churches; they can be terribly destructive of churches if allowed by them to degenerate into “Synagogues of Satan.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷*Second London Confession*, 26.3.