BAPTISTS AND ASSOCIATION: A DISCUSSION PAPER

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INTRODUCTION

Conversations about autonomy and association, affiliation and disaffiliation have been part of the Baptist story from the very beginning, as an outworking of basic Baptist convictions. One of the core convictions that shapes these dynamics is the foundational principle that the local community of believers is accountable to the Lord Jesus for its obedience and faithfulness to the gospel; another equally important conviction is the belief that this allegiance calls for bonds of mutual love and gospel partnership with others who serve the same Lord Jesus.

When John Smyth and Thomas Helwys left England in 1608, it was with a group of fellow-believers who had already found themselves compelled to separate from the national church because they could not in good conscience conform to its doctrines and practices. The belief that they came to regarding the baptism of believers led to a further separation, which was followed by a series of gradual steps back into fellowship with other communities of believers with whom they had sufficient common ground to enter into association. Smyth joined with the Waterland Mennonites and Helwys returned to England to establish the first of what became a growing number of Baptist churches there, partnering with one another as far as conscience permitted, without overriding the accountability of the local congregation to Christ.

This sort of complex interplay between autonomy and association, affiliation and disaffiliation continued to be part of the Baptist story across the following decades. My own ancestor, Richard Kingsnorth, became part of that story when he came to Baptist convictions, left the Church of England, and helped to plant a small Baptist church in his own home in Staplehurst, Kent, in 1644. The founding members of the church entered a covenant with one another, solemnly promising to:

> *willingly give up ourselves to the Lord, and unto on another in oneness of Spirit to be his people, in, and of that one faith of the Gospell that was once delivered to the saints; striving together for that one Faith and order of the Gospell, so to bee a Congregation of the Lord Jesus . . . doeing our duty, in the case of all his ordinances, . . . watching over and caring for one another for good.*[1]

The decades that followed saw new congregations planted in the surrounding villages, with new church covenants drawn up, in some cases at least, by the daughter congregations. The daughter congregations also established and maintained links of association with each other and with other churches, and from time to time were compelled to break those links over differences that they considered to be sufficiently weighty; there was an early split over the doctrine of election, for example, and another split several decades later over the Trinity.

Subsequent centuries have seen that interplay between autonomy and association play out in a variety of ways within Baptist associations in different times and places. In this discussion paper we won't be arguing for one particular version of how that interplay should be understood and practised. But we will be arguing that both dimensions of Baptist associational polity are important, and have been from the beginning. Each local community of believers must answer to Christ for the decisions that it takes to enter into association with others and to break the bonds of association, and the association, in turn, must answer to Christ for its collective response to the gospel's call for unity and holiness, faithfulness and love.

In the pages that follow, therefore, we will seek to identify **both** matters of basic Baptist consensus **and** areas of controversy and debate, highlighting the questions that need to be considered by churches in forming their opinions. We will offer examples from Baptist history of various ways in which association has been understood and practised, and lay out some of the main theological options for how we might go about framing our own thinking about the nature and purpose of association.

[1] We will use the original spelling when quoting from historical documents.

These are questions that need to be discussed by members of local churches at their church meetings. We are hoping that this paper will be a resource for churches as they discuss where they stand on these questions, so that when we meet together as an association, now and in the future, our deliberations might be prayerful, historically aware, biblically grounded and theologically coherent.

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BAPTIST AFFILIATION AND ASSOCIATION—THE SHORT STORY[2]

THE ORIGINS OF BAPTIST ASSOCIATIONALISM

The practice of locally autonomous congregations joining together around common beliefs and purposes is evident from the beginning of the Baptist story in the days following the English reformation. However, different patterns of association emerged reflecting, in part, complex interactions of theological differences (esp., General and Particular reflecting differing views on the extent of Christ's atoning work), the historical experience of persecution, exile and return, and geographical location. But it was this experience that prompted the recognition of a need to have fellowship with other like-minded congregations for encouragement and support, and join in common endeavour, such as the planting of new congregations.

THE PURPOSES OF ASSOCIATIONS

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

This period of the story focuses naturally on the United Kingdom, as this is where the most significant developments in Baptist theology and practice originated. General Baptists (such as the East Midlands and London associations in the mid-seventeenth century, or the (London, then) national assembly following the edict of toleration in 1689) operated with a more cohesive pattern of association. Particular Baptists (such the mid-century Welsh, Irish, and Midlands association, or the London Assembly of 1689) maintained a greater degree of autonomy for local churches. Even with these different emphases, they operated with substantially the same purposes:

- To provide advice on theological and practical matters (such as the appropriateness of hymn-singing, or marrying a non-Baptist);
- To cooperate in common cause, especially evangelism and church planting;
- To extend financial support to needy congregations;
- To maintain purity of doctrine and morals across the associated churches (including, for instance, a concern that ministers were engaged in vices such as participating in cockfighting and dancing, or wearing extravagant clothing);
- To provide moral and prayer support (especially prior to 1689 when they faced active persecution).

The same broad themes are evident amongst Baptist churches in the emerging American colonies in the period leading up to the Great Awakening.

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

In the Eighteenth Century the focus of the story shifts to North America, largely due to the significance of the Great Awakening and the events that followed, including the rapid growth of the denomination, and significant differences in Baptist responses to the revivals. Regular Baptists, largely urban in nature, were generally suspicious of the emotivism of the revivalists; Separate Baptist churches, many of which were the product of the revivals, saw them as the work of God. Separate Baptists had a looser form of

[2] A longer and more detailed version is available on the Baptist Churches of NSW/ACT website which you can access HERE.

association, focusing on evangelistic meetings and did not require doctrinal conformity or support formal theological education of ministers. Regular Baptists formed a number of associations, which had similar purposes to those of their British forebears:

- To monitor doctrine, often connected to a confession that was binding on member churches;
- To advise on practice (such as the role of women, whether baptism by immersion was required for membership);
- To supply ministers (including endorsement and disendorsement of prospective ministers);
- To cooperate in common causes such as education and advocating for religious liberty;
- To provide moral and prayer support (especially in locales facing persecution);
- To offer examples of good preaching.

Towards the end of the century, with the issues raised by the revivals becoming less of a concern, and a growing struggle for religious liberty, the two groups began to explore ways of working together, with some associations merging in the southern states after the Revolutionary War.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

Over the course of the nineteenth century national Baptist associations gradually emerged in Britain, initially maintaining the separation between General and Particular Baptists. The Particular Baptists were the first to form a single national association in 1813, the Baptist Union. While it was reorganised a couple of time in the mid-1900s, its aims were largely focused on cooperation in evangelism, mission (local and cross-cultural) and church planting. Given shifting theological and cultural priorities, including the experience of cooperating across the General/Particular divide following the evangelical revivals, debates with Roman Catholicism and rationalism, the differences that had earlier divided them became less significant. This resulted in growing formal and informal cooperation and softening of previous doctrinal stances, eventuating in the inclusion of General Baptists in a (largely functionally oriented) Baptist Union.

In the new nation, the United States of America, things were rather more complicated. The early eighteenth century saw a proliferation of state-based conventions (focused largely on evangelism and mission), but with a growing interest in the development of a national association. However, northern Baptists tended towards a “society” model, in which individual persons were members, whereas those in the southern states tended to adopt a “convention” model, with churches as members, centralised structures and agencies. These differences persisted in the early national association, but the convention divided along geographical lines in the Civil War period, with both conventions focusing primarily on cooperative endeavours in their respective regions.

In the Australian colonies loose associations of Baptist churches developed. The first formal association in the New South Wales colony was formed in 1868 and by 1870 had expanded into a group of eleven churches of mixed theological persuasion. Its primary purpose was “fostering fellowship, support of local churches, training of ministers and mission.”

TWENTIETH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT

The twentieth century saw a significant shift towards centralised denominational structures and strategic planning, largely driven by a pragmatic desire for efficiency in a modern world. British Baptists, for instance, adopted a centralised denominational structure which included headquarters and general superintendents. In the USA the Northern Convention adopted a similar approach, in which theological convictions were regarded by many as less important than efficient cooperation.

Southern Baptists, on the other hand, while including sharing commitments to central control and fostering the work of local churches and missions, emphasised commonality of doctrine and practice. Their purpose explicitly included ensuring "a complete loyalty at home and abroad, unembarrassed by entangling alliances with other bodies holding to different standards of doctrine and different views of life and order."

The approach of the Baptist World Alliance is in clear contrast to this. The formation of the Baptist World Alliance in 1905 arose in a context of increasing interest in ecumenical movements in Britain, the USA and Australia. A missionally pragmatic acceptance of theological diversity within unity has become a hallmark of BWA.

RATIONALES FOR ASSOCIATIONALISM

PRAGMATIC RATIONALE

Many Baptist associations have not sought to ground their reasons for associating in Scripture or theology. The Philadelphia Association in 1767, for example, based their reasons for association on pragmatic grounds. Some historians argue that Biblical and theological arguments were introduced later to justify the existence of associations.

BIBLICAL RATIONALES

While many associations did not explicitly base their decision to associate on biblical precedent, there were some that did appeal to Scripture as a source of precedents or warrants for their decision to affiliate with one another.

ACTS 15 - THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM

The earliest associations all professed a desire to offer mutual assistance to one another. The First London Confession declared individual churches were "by all meanes convenient to have counsel and help of one another in all needfull affaires of the Church." The General Baptist Confession of 1651 similarly stated that one purpose of the association was to share wisdom between the churches when resolving controversies. The need for help and advice was deemed necessary in the days of the earliest Baptist churches because they were small groups of gathered believers, in many cases without the leadership of ordained clergy.

Early Baptists pointed to the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 as providing a model for this relationship. The Abingdon Association (1656) stated that their churches were to "hold a firme communion each with other in point of advice in doubtfull matters and controversies, Acts 15. 1f, 6, 24, 28; 16.4f. Which scriptures, compared together, shew that the church at Jerusalem held communion with the church of Antioch affording help to them as they could."

The Philadelphia Association also appealed to Acts 15 as a Biblical parallel to Baptist association. Benjamin Griffith's 1753 essay written for the Association directly appealed to this passage in his explanation of the nature of association. Other American Baptist associations adopted the same approach.

BODY OF CHRIST: 1 COR 12

Another biblical text frequently quoted or alluded to as a basis for associating with one another was the image of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12. The Midlands association stated that they wished to maintain "puritie of doctrine, exercise of love and good conversation" because their churches were

members of the one body of Christ (1 Cor 12.12, 29). The Abingdon Association made a similar claim, asserting that there was an analogy between the relationship that individual believers had with one another as members of a church and the relationship that churches have with one another as members of an association: "For the churches of Christ doe all make up one body or church in generall under Christ their head as Eph. 1.22f.; Col. 1.24; Eph. 5.23ff.; 1 Cor. 12.13f."

The image of the churches in an association as fellow-members in the body of Christ was used to justify practices such as sending ministers out to preach to churches without a pastor. The body of Christ metaphor functioned in a manner that was not merely *descriptive* of the relationship between the local congregation and the association, but also *prescriptive*, impelling churches to assist one another in the ministry and mission of Christ.

THEOLOGICAL RATIONALES

UNIVERSAL CHURCH

In addition to appeals to biblical passages such as Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians 12, Baptists also, from as early as the 1650s, made use of language drawn from the traditional credal "marks" of the true church (unity, holiness, catholicity/universality and apostolicity) in their statements about the rationale for association between local congregations. While all Christians were members of the universal church (a fact acknowledged by the Particular Baptists in the introduction to the Second London Confession and by the General Baptists in the preface to their *Orthodox Creed*), only those who agreed with their theological convictions composed the individual Baptist churches.

ASSOCIATIONAL PRINCIPLE

This "associational principle" which was first articulated by English Baptists in the 1650s was adopted in the American colonies as well. The Philadelphia confession, for example, included the explanation that "the catholic or universal church … consists of the whole number of the elect" (Art. 1, Ch XXVII). The key elements of the associational principle in the American context were:

- The local church is authentically the body of Christ;
- The churches are also members of the one body of Christ;
- The association was considered to be a "church of churches;"
- Baptists are the faithful church, but not the exclusive church.

This model usually asserts the interdependence, as well as independency, of local churches. It grants greater authority to associations and views an association as an expression of the larger church, believing the churches to be the true associational constituency.

This theological approach has been adopted by North American Baptists in recent years. After keeping relatively silent on the issue during the first half of the twentieth century, in 1969 the "Statement of Purpose of American Baptist Churches in the USA" was passed. It described the national convention as a "manifestation of the church universal." It identified two ecclesiastical bodies – the congregation and the association – and identified the national association as part of the body of Christ.

MODELS OF ASSOCIATION

The associational principle seeks to balance both the independence (or autonomy) of local congregations and their interdependence (or unity in the universal body of Christ). Similarly, the biblical

and theological justification given tends to general affirmations of unity and autonomy rather than specific arguments for association *per se*. As is evident from the story so far, Baptist churches have always wrestled with the tension between the autonomy of individual churches and the commitments that they made to one another as members of an association. A matter of ongoing debate has been the level of "control" that may (or may not) be ceded by a local church to an association of churches.

NETWORK WITHOUT INTERFERENCE

This approach is most evident in the Seventeenth century Particular Baptists in Britain and American Separate Baptists (and BWA). The association and its officers might provide advice, but are not entitled to have "jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or to impose their determination on the churches or officers." As a non-ecclesial body, it could arbitrate disagreements, but the individual churches had ultimate say over how they responded.

ASSOCIATION WITH LIMITED AUTHORITY

This model was adopted by the General Baptists in Britain. While the autonomy of the local church was clearly affirmed, they understood themselves to be accountable to other churches in their association. Associations and their officers had a degree of authority over member churches, extending even to the Assembly's power of excommunication. A similar view was expressed amongst the Baptists of the Philadelphia colony in the Americas. Congregational autonomy was emphasized, but "defection of doctrine or practice" could lead to the dissolution of the bonds of association.

ASSOCIATION AS DENOMINATION

A different approach to association was taken in Britain, resulting in a centralised denominational structure. As we saw earlier, this was driven by a pragmatic desire for the greater efficiency and effectiveness that afforded by a central organisation with a discrete vision. While this did not entail a formal shift in ecclesiology, it did result in the forging of closer ties between ministers and the Baptist Union, and a sense that local churches were agents of a larger church body. A similar line was taken by the (American) Northern Baptist Convention which was produced by the merger of a number of state conventions and societies. Once again, a pragmatic concern with serving the interests of the denomination was clear; the denomination and its agencies had a "purely advisory" role, and the "independence of the local church" was clearly affirmed.

ASSOCIATION AS CONVENTION

Conventions adopt a yet more centralised approach, with a degree of control over key functions and/or doctrines. In the nineteenth century they were largely a North American phenomenon and were geographically based, often at a state level. Conventions raised funds from church contributions, employed staff, and sponsored ministries such as home and foreign mission, Christian education and publications, which were generally governed by a central board. This approach has taken a particular turn in the late twentieth century in the centrally mandated and enforced confessional conformity of the Southern Baptist Convention.

THE NSW & ACT BAPTIST EXPERIENCE

In the early part of the century, NSW Baptists largely followed Britain, as reflected in A.J. Waldock's determination to adopt "a fixed policy and determined plan," a "method in our work" to ensure progress rather than leaving it "to haphazard and chance." As a result, regional associations were developed, along with a Home Mission Society that exerted control over smaller Baptist churches. Many in the Baptist Union continued to advocate the independence of the local church, but Waldock saw this as a

“source of weakness,” an impediment to effective evangelism and church planting. Both perspectives clearly persist in the NSW and ACT Baptist Association.

The purposes of the Baptist Union have also expanded to include education and social welfare, reflecting the influence of British Baptists. For instance, the mid-twentieth-century Baptist Forward Movement’s commitment to social engagement eventually led to the formation of the Baptist Homes Trust (the foundation for BaptistCare). From the middle of the twentieth century the Southern Baptist Convention also influenced Australian Baptists, with advocacy for All Age Sunday School and attempts to develop a model Baptist (church) identity gaining traction in some circles. The influence of both British and (Southern) American Baptist approaches to church life and affiliation were fostered, in part, by personal and educational connections between key figures in NSW and ACT Baptists and their respective overseas counterparts.

While the purposes of the Baptist Association of Churches of NSW & ACT continue to focus on growing healthy churches, recent strategic reforms have resulted in a shift towards commitment to a common, clearly articulated “vision” and direction.

“SO WHAT?” FOR OUR ASSOCIATION

A number of observations come to mind as we reflect on the interplay of local church autonomy and association in Baptist history.

The first, and most obvious one, is that there is no (one, true) “Baptist” view on the matter. A stronger emphasis on local autonomy with a corresponding weaker role for associations and institutions is more prevalent in particular times and places, and in connection with particular theological emphases (say, Particular as opposed to General Baptists). Likewise, a stronger emphasis on associations and institutions is prevalent in other places and times (say, Philadelphia in the eighteenth century), and in connection with other theological emphases (say, explicitly evangelical Baptists after the Great Awakening). Even this is complicated: there are no clear “fault lines”—for instance loose associational connections may coexist with very tight theological boundaries (say, the English Particular Baptists of the seventeenth century). Baptist views on affiliation, local church autonomy, and common theology are varied and complex, and are often entangled with other, not specifically *Baptist* theological concerns.

The second is that each of these emphases comes with strengths and weaknesses (as is generally the case, each view suffers from the weakness of its assets). “Looser” approaches to common theology allow for freedom and creativity, but run the risk of theological drift that has the potential to undermine our common commitment to Christ and his mission. “Tighter” approaches allow for a unity of faith, but run the risk of unhelpful constraint on creativity and innovation in theological and missional expression. Similarly, “looser” approaches to institutional association allow for creativity and diversity in the practice of ministry and mission in the local context, but come with the potential for isolation and inefficiencies, while “tighter” approaches allow for cooperation and efficiency, but might constrain local creativity and diversity.

Third, and perhaps most controversially, biblical and theological justification for these views is generally weak, and often operates by way of special pleading. Or at least this is the case when these rationales go beyond fairly thin and basic commitments to local churches as communities of disciples called to engage in God’s mission in the world, and to the unity of the universal Church and our call to cooperate in effective mission. This should not be taken to mean that affiliation is unimportant theologically, as if faithfulness and effectiveness in our common calling to witness to Christ in word and deed is of no theological weight.

And so, it seems to us that a number of conclusions follow.

1. No one “group” can claim that theirs is the *Baptist* view (and that those who disagree are being unbaptist);
2. We need to recognise the defects and assets of our particular view, and seek, by way of the exercise of godly wisdom, to maximise the pluses and minimise the minuses;
3. We must acknowledge the complex interplay of theological commitments in the forming of our views on affiliation and autonomy.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Do you identify with a particular moment (or location) in the Baptist story? How does that influence your attitudes to the current discussion of affiliation and local church autonomy?
2. What do you see as the most important emphasis? What “price” are you willing to pay for it?
3. Do you see doctrinal agreement as important for association? Why/not?

FURTHER READING

If you are interested in reading a longer and more detailed discussion of our historical examples of association, there is an extended version of this paper available on the Baptist churches of NSW/ACT website which you can access HERE.

Here are the sources we consulted for this paper if you would like to read further.

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