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PARTICULAR BAPTISTS OF THE NORTHAMPTONSHIRE BAPTIST ASSOCIATION AS REFLECTED IN THE CIRCULAR LETTERS 1765-1820

The first part of this paper, with attitudes to government, ministerial gifts, education, and prayer, appeared in the previous issue of the Baptist Quarterly, October 1996.

6. ATTITUDE TO THE LORD'S DAY, CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND THE ORDINANCES

The Lord's Day The letter of 1786, written by John Sutcliff, addressed the Association on the Authority and Sanctification of the Lord's Day. The letter commences by referring to the fourth commandment and to the creation. Stating that the sabbath was a day divinely set aside for religious ends and purposes, Sutcliff says that the Lord blessed and hallowed the sabbath day, which is sanctified by being set apart for holy purposes.⁵² He admits that we are not told explicitly how the patriarchs acted, but refers in a footnote to Dr Watts' *On the holiness of times*, which observes that, even if the Bible were silent on this, the express institution in the beginning inferred that sabbath observance was practised in patriarchal times.⁵³ In the New Testament Jesus settled the laws for its observance; it is clear that the apostles observed such a day. That it was moved from the seventh to the first day of the week was neither here nor there, says Sutcliff; what is important is that one day in seven should be set apart. Here he quotes Jonathan Edwards' *Sermon on Perpetuity and the Change of the Sabbath*, and proceeds to outline the manner in which it should be observed.

On this day, you will carefully *abstain* from whatever is *unlawful*. Study, in an attentive manner, the nature of the divine command. As you wish to act with christian integrity, impartially examine the rule of your duty. What may be lawful, what may be duty on another day, may be, and in numerous instances is, absolutely sinful on this. Make conscience your conduct. Let no part of the sabbath be appropriated to worldly business, the settling of your accounts, unprofitable visits, and journeys of pleasure, or for the prosecution of secular schemes. True, works of *necessity* and *mercy* are allowed; but we should be very serious and cautious in determining what may be so. A strong inclination of mind to any work, that may promise considerable profit or advantage, is in danger of influencing the judgement, to call it a *necessary* one.

And while you carefully abstain from that which is evil, you will conscientiously *follow* after what is *good*. Why are you to lay aside your worldly employ? One chief reason is, that you may be at leisure to serve God. Are not religious exercises, the proper business of the day? These are of various kinds; some private, and some public. But let us consider the subject a little more closely. Remember, brethren, that you ought to keep the day *completely*, i.e. keep the whole of it. We are much

afraid, that here, many are awfully defective. You should *begin* the day as *early* as you do any other in an ordinary way. Beware of spending more of that precious morning in your beds, than you do in common the rest of the week. Let not the readiness with which you arise to attend the concerns of the world through the week, exceed the alacrity with which you leave your beds on the *sabbath* morning, to discharge the sacred duties of that holy day. Be not in a hurry to close the day. Sacred hours are precious. Rob not God, or your own souls, of holy time. Make the day that is devoted to the service of God, as long, as in an ordinary way, you make the days allotted you to pursue the world. If love to the world has the predominance over your heart, your religion is vain. But, brethren, we hope better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak.

Are not the *duties* of the day sufficiently numerous and important, to engage the *whole* of it? Let us divide them into three classes. Some belong to the house of God; some to the family; and some to the closet. Let us begin with the closet. Here you should enter upon and end the day. Here is the abundance of very serious employ. You have the scriptures to read; the exercises of prayer and praise, of meditation and self-examination to attend upon. Let us proceed to the family. Some of you are heads, in those little societies. Remember, that you have their souls as well as their bodies, under your care. You should read the word of God to them. They need your introduction. As you ought to pray with them daily, so on the *sabbath* especially. You are to be, as it were, priest and king in your family. Add the duties of the house of God. You will not forsake the assembling of yourselves together. In your public social worship, you openly own God, while you wait for, and sometimes happily find him owning of you. This is the grand end of the institution. Certainly there is full employ, for the whole of the day. You may observe the men of the world all alive in their pursuits. Surely you have *superior* motives to activity. Study then to excel them in diligence and activity.⁵⁴

You should spend time talking about the spiritual nature of the day, and how to spend it.

Some attention to your very food may not be improper. Guard against an excessive indulgence of your appetites, especially on the Lord's-day. Some people have the custom of getting the best dinner they have in all the week on the sabbath, on which account it is too frequent for one of the family to be detained from divine service in the morning to prepare it; while it may be all are rendered less fit for public worship in the afternoon, as a full stomach, especially if the food is rich, naturally tends to promote drowsiness, listlessness, and inattention. - Array yourselves in a clean and decent manner, but beware of that apparel which consumes a large portion of time in putting it on. When so much time is spent at the *looking-glass*, there is but little remains for your *bible*, and your *knees*. - Attend to public worship regularly and seriously. Be present at the beginning of the service. Rob not yourself of the first part of the opportunity, nor disturb the devotion of others, by being too late. - While there, watch against drowsiness. Remember, that while you are asleep, your *pew* is just as good a worshipper as you are, though not so offensive either to God or man. Forget not, that one end of worship is, to have *intercourse with God*. Solemn thought! - When worship is over, depart with a becoming gravity. How disgraceful to see a

congregation all in a hurry, as if they are striving to see who could quit the place first! Such persons seem as if they thought, that they had been in a prison, and are so pleased to see the doors opened, that they are ready to leap out for joy. - On your way home, act in character. Recollect where you have been, and the solemn account you have to give. Examine what advantage you have received, and enquire what you can do for God and his cause, more than you have ever yet done. Ask your conscience, what you have to be thankful for, and of what to be ashamed. - Shun the various avocations and amusements by which sacred time is often wasted. - Walking in the fields for mere recreation, or standing at your door to see everybody that passes by, are practices that must pain the mind on serious reflection. - When the topics of your conversation are, news from abroad, or the situation of the nation at home; the state of the markets abroad, or the common affairs in life, your conduct is a direct breach of the *sabbath*. On it, you are required, not to find your own pleasure, or speak your own words, but to call it a delight, the holy of the Lord, and honourable, spending it in honouring him. Isa. lviii. 13.⁵⁵

The writer then commends the new 'sunday schools':

It may be hoped that the prevailing practice of establishing schools on the Lord's-day, may be attended with the most beneficial effects. Love to our country, but especially love to religion, should rouse in our bosoms a warm concern for the welfare of the rising age. The proper education of youth is a matter of the highest importance. The manner in which the *sabbath-day* is spent by multitudes has the most pernicious effect upon their minds and morals. On it a greater progress is commonly made in vice, than upon the other six. According to the present laudable plan, many are in great measure preserved from what would be hurtful; and by being taught to read, and regularly brought to the public worship of God, are in the way to learn that, which, through a divine blessing, may be profitable to themselves and render them more useful members of society at large.⁵⁶

The conclusion of the letter is not without significance in the total Christian duty and attitude:

Finally, brethren, suffer the word of exhortation once more. Remember, that though a due attention to the *Lord's-day*, or *christian sabbath*, is an article of great importance, yet the *manner* in which you spend the *other six*, is not a matter of indifferency. Let your conduct in the world be consistent with that of the house of God. Give no occasion to any in the week, to reproach you with hypocrisy on the *sabbath*. Rather, let it appear, seeing the *Lord's-day* is the first of the week, that through the whole, your practice is under the influence of what you then professed.⁵⁷

Church Membership In 1800 and 1801 two letters were written on the subject of Christian fellowship: Sutcliff wrote the first on the *Qualifications for Church Fellowship* and J. W. Morris the second on *A Persuasive to Church Fellowship*. In the first letter Sutcliff suggests that there are two questions. First, what properly qualifies a person in himself for a connexion with a Christian church? Second, what are the qualifications that will justify a Christian church in receiving him? On the first, after outlining the nature of a spiritual person, referring to I Peter 2 and other

New Testament passages, he concludes: 'Let us sum up the whole in a few words. Those who are proper characters to be received into communion with a christian church, should be spiritual men; men whose minds harmonize with the design of Christ in the constitution of a christian church; men disposed to seek the good of the interest of Christ in general, and of that society to which they unite in particular; men devoted to God; men who hold fast the form of sound words; and who in their spirit and walk, adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour.'⁵⁸

Turning to the second aspect, he outlines the qualifications needed in a person for the church to receive him. First, he must profess Christianity, pure and personal. Sutcliff again refers to Jonathan Edwards (*The Qualification for Full Communion the Visible Church*). This profession of Christianity must be made verbally to the church. Those who cleave to congregational church-government are sometimes criticized for this practice, but this profession must be personal and not watered down into an acknowledgement of the general doctrines of Christianity.⁵⁹ Secondly, there must be a declared willingness to yield obedience to all the commandments of Christ.

Thirdly, the spirit or manner in which the profession is expressed will comport with what is professed: 'Many of those who propose themselves for membership with our churches are of *some standing in religious profession*; and in these cases an enquiry ought no doubt to be made, whether their conversation has been, and continues to be consistent with it. And even those whose repentance may be very recent, if it be genuine, some fruits of it will be apparent.'⁶⁰

Morris's letter continues the theme as a persuasive to church fellowship, remarking in its opening that in all the churches there are a number of individuals who appear, in a judgement of charity, to have received the truth in love, and whose conduct in other respects is such as becomes the gospel, yet who live in neglect of its positive institutions.⁶¹ The reasons for such neglect are many. Some feel that they are living in some known sin, and therefore are not fit to associate with the church of God. Some feel that a relation to the church of God would lay upon them a greater obligation to a strict and holy life than they wish to take up. Others are kept from it by mere worldly motives, fearing their temporal interest would suffer from such a connexion. They have relations and friends who are averse to religion and would be offended by their profession, and they might be disinherited or sustain losses in their worldly circumstances. For others the dread of reproach is a means of preventing them from following more fully. Natural timidity besets others and keeps them back from profession of faith. Finally, some are deterred from a compliance to this duty by a fear lest they should not be proper subjects.⁶²

The rest of the letter expounds the importance of Christian fellowship as binding upon the followers of Christ. Morris concludes:

If these sentiments be properly considered and felt, they will not only stimulate those to prompt obedience, who have hitherto neglected the institutions of Christ, but impress us all with a sense of our great advantages, and cause us to rejoice with

trembling. We stand on high ground: we walk as upon the borders of heaven: let us watch and pray, lest we be found cleaving to the earth, notwithstanding these distinguished privileges. Nay, it is not impossible that from these heights some of us may fall, like the inhabitants of Capernaum, into perdition!

Finally, it may not be unprofitable for those of us who are ministers and members of churches to enquire whether the neglects of which we complain may not be in part owing to something in us? If a minister be uninterested, and consequently uninteresting, in his work; if there be but little savour in his spirit, or profit arising from his communications; if the people be haughty, covetous, self-willed, litigious, and conformed to this world; there will be but little encouragement for young christians to cast in their lot with them. Or, if none of these evils be remarkably apparent, yet if there be a want of holy affection and free conversation, it will not be much otherwise. It is by our having fellowship with God, that godly minds will be induced to have fellowship with us. *We will go with thee, say they, for we have heard that God is with you.*⁶³

If church fellowship is so much part of the Christian duty, what do these letters say about the church and the duties of membership? The letter of 1777, written by John Ryland sen., deals with the church, while the duties of membership are dealt with a year later by Richard Hopper. First, the church is a society very much distinguished from the civil and political societies, by the spiritual nature of its constitution. It is made up of people who are real believers. The form of the church is defined thus:

This consists in the free and mutual consent of believing persons to walk together before God. A Church is a voluntary society: no man is naturally born into a Gospel Church; no man can be forced into it; but every true christian must be a volunteer: he is made willing in the day of victorious power of the Spirit of God, and then they give themselves to the Lord, and to one another, by the will of God. 2 Cor vii, 5 - Jesus, our glorious general, disdains to impress men by a mere force into his armies: he infuses freely a divine life in our souls, and then we freely give ourselves to God.⁶⁴

The Letter details how the faith and order of the church was seen. It states that the confession of faith and catechism are openly published and should not be departed from. The 'honored brethren, the ministers at Bristol' have recently published two versions of the catechism, with and without proofs, and this is commended to every member.⁶⁵ The paragraphs that define the order of the church are worth quoting in full.

This we hold to be congregational, or what is usually stiled [*sic*] independent. Let this word be rightly understood:- we do not judge ourselves independent of civil government, as we are members of society: no sirs! we are so far from assuming independence on the good old British constitution, that we will dare to affirm, no men in England, or in the world, are better friends to such civil government than we are, and desire always to be. It ever will be our principle and our interest to pray for and support a protestant king, that the crown may fit easy, and shine gloriously upon his

head to the latest posterity. Nor do we mean an independence on the providence and grace of God - here we profess ourselves dependent every moment to eternity.

But, by the word *independent*, we mean, that the Lord Jesus Christ, the sole fountain of all spiritual rights and power, has given us allowance and command to associate together, to incorporate ourselves into regular societies, to carry on all the parts of public worship and discipline, to choose our pastors and deacons, to receive in new members, to admonish and reprove those who violate his laws, and to exclude from us all that prove incorrigible and impenitent: in a word, that we have a right and power to do every thing that shall be for the glory of Christ and our own happiness, without being necessarily obliged to call in the aid of other pastors and churches, or of being subject, in matters of faith and worship, to any pretended spiritual power on earth whatsoever.⁶⁶

When Ryland defines the officers of the church he writes of two orders. The first, Pastors, Elders, or Bishops, are appointed and ordained to represent to the people the whole system of truth in the law and the gospel in the most striking and amiable light; to lead worship of the whole church, in all its branches; to administer all public ordinances; to take the sense and vote of the church with respect to the admission of new members; and to execute every part of the people's determinations. The other order of officers, Deacons, 'have the honour to be ordained of God our Saviour, to represent his compassionate heart to the poor of the church; and also to represent and express the affections and bowels of the church to their dear pastors, that they may be supplied with a competence of temporal goods, and rendered easy and happy in their studies and labours.'⁶⁷

Ryland looks briefly at the worship in the ordinances of the church, with which we shall deal more fully later. Following this, under the heading of the spirit and conduct of the church, he meditates on I Corinthians 13 at great length as expressing the nature of this spirit, and finally turns to the ends and uses of the church. These he defines as fourfold: first, to represent God's true character in the world; second, to stop the mouths of the wicked, and condemn the finally impenitent at the last day; third, to allure awakened and inquiring souls to Christ, to be happy in his great and precious salvation; and lastly, to promote one another's present and eternal happiness.⁶⁸

The next letter, written in 1778 by Richard Hopper, minister of the Friar Lane Church in Nottingham, turns to the duties of a church member. He says at the beginning that the duties of church members may be considered as either private or public, personal or relative, particular or general, and all these duties owe their beauty, vigour, spirituality and acceptableness to the influence received from Christ as head of the church.⁶⁹ The relative duties depend on personal religion and internal godliness: while we ought to be concerned about our collective witness and responsibility, we still ought to consider the obligations imposed by church membership and by the office held. Hopper deals with the two orders of officer in this manner:

Those of us who are invested with any office in the Church, ought seriously to consider the obligations under which we lie. Such who have the honour to be ministers and pastors in the Churches, ought diligently to feed the Church of God, by preaching the precious truth of the gospel, administering ordinances, &c. To study to approve themselves unto God and men, to be faithful to their charge, to dwell on the more substantial parts of religion, able to defend the truths of Christ against undermining Hereticks; to be clear, concise and spiritual; their stile [*sic*] ought to be manly, nervous and plain: in short, every part of their conduct whether in preaching, administering ordinances, or visiting their people, ought to indicate the unutterable dignity, value and importance of their great and sacred employ. See their duty fully delineated in Dr Gill's Body of practical Div. Vol 3d. Likewise a sermon preached by brother Hall at the ordination of brother Moreton of Kettering.

So likewise the Deacons, the other order of officers in the Church, have an employment arduous and honourable; their principal employ seems to be helpers of the church and minister; to take care of tables, viz. the Lord's table, the ministers table, and the poor's table; their work and office require much wisdom and prudence, faithfulness and love, activity and zeal &c.

It is well for ministers and deacons to consider the place they stand in, and the account they have to give in a little time: that ought always to be found in their ears, *Thou must give an account of thy Stewardship*. As there is a reciprocal obligation, between the officers in the Church and the Members in general, so likewise the latter ought to consider their duty to their ministers and deacons: but as our principal design in addressing you this year, is not to describe the officers of the church, or their duties in particular, but our obligation in general, we shall proceed to point out the duties which every Church of Christ ought to carefully, and constantly to practise. As all evangelical obedience is founded upon, connected with, and flows from a proper acquaintance with truth; it most evidently follows, that every church ought to be concerned, studiously concern'd for the faith and order of the gospel. If once truth is gone, or trifled with, what kind of body shall we be? You ought to be tenacious for the pure, unmixed, unadulterated gospel: and to consider truth as a jewel which ought not to be bartered away on any account. 2 Cor 13,8. *For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth*. Prov 23, 23. *Buy the truth, and sell it not*. Especially you ought to stand fast in this day of abounding errors.⁷⁰

Members of the church ought to have fervent love toward one another and to do all they can to promote peace as well as purity. Members of the community ought to show sympathetic concern to one another in times of trouble, and to watch over one another. In church relations, we are called upon to bear with one another, not to bear hard upon each other: 'it is a sure sign of a declining state in spiritual concerns, when we sink into a censorious, uncharitable disposition; when the Soul is most spiritual in its actings; though it hath the keenest aversion to sin, yet it can bear the most with the weakness of others.'⁷¹ It is the duty of all church members to pray for one another, and for 'all followers of the Lamb'; they also ought to be conscientious and constant in assembling together for worship.

Hopper uses the rest of the letter to draw out from scripture the reasons for these duties and the blessings which will follow concluding,

Churches walking together in the faith and fear of God are the best proof against the power and policy of Satan, while the careless and carnal become an easy prey: By such a deportment the very arduous work and employ of Officers amongst you will be much facilitated; whereas leanness and languor always increase their burden. Yea, you will have more enjoyment, brighter hopes of heaven, and be train'd up for glory.

Thus, dear Brethren, we have with feeling concern imparted our cordial advice; to which we shall add our fervent Prayers that you may know more distinctly, and practice more freely and spiritually, every part of duty which you are called to in this high, this honourable relation: That you may enjoy all the sweets of Zion's Hill; be training up for the full enjoyment of God in the Church triumphant, where duties will be delightful, darkness dispell'd and you with the thousands of the redeemed, sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of your Father.⁷²

A further duty incumbent on the church was that of discipline, and Andrew Fuller deals with this in the letter of 1799. In attending to those things which are the proper objects of discipline, our first concern should be to ensure that all our measures are aimed at the good of the person disciplined and the honour of God. For both these ends, Fuller points to the case of the Corinthian offender.⁷³ There is a need to distinguish between the faults arising from sudden temptation and those which are premeditated. The first require compassionate treatment, and the latter greater severity. In all admonition there should be due regard for the age and character of the person. The execution of Christian discipline much can be done by the individual, and upon a proper discharge of these duties much of the peace and purity of the church depends.⁷⁴

The rules of Matthew 18 are to be applied rigorously, and by so doing many can be reclaimed without having to bring the fault into the limelight of the church meeting. There is also a duty incumbent on church members towards those who have been censured by the church:

If they still continue in a state of impenitence, persist in their sin, or be unreconciled to the churches' proceedings with them, it is of the utmost consequence that every member should act a uniform part towards them. We may it is true continue our ordinary and necessary intercourse with them as men, in the concerns of this life: but there must be no familiarity, no social interchange, no visiting to them, nor receiving visits from them, nothing in short that is expressive of connivance at their conduct.⁷⁵

Fuller then expounded the New Testament grounds for censure and discipline. First he explores departure from the faith of the gospel, or from any of its leading doctrines.

It has been asked by persons who disapprove of all church proceedings on account of difference in religious principles, who is to judge what is heresy? We answer, those who are to judge what is immorality in dealing with loose characters. To suppose it impossible to judge what heresy is, or to deny that the power of so deciding rests in a Christian Church, is to charge the apostolic precept with impertinence. It is true the judgement of a church may be erroneous, as well as that of an individual; and it

becomes them in their decisions to consider that they will all be revised at the great day: but the same may be said of all human judgement, civil or judicial, to which no one is so void of reason as on this account to object.

It has been further objected, that censuring a person on account of his religious sentiments invades the right of private judgement, is inconsistent with the liberty of the gospel, and contrary to the leading principles on which protestants have separated from the Church of Rome, and Protestant Dissenters from the Church of England. The right of private judgement, while we claim no connection with others, is an undoubted right. We may be christians, infidels, or atheists, and none but God has any control over us: but if we desire the friendship and esteem of good men notwithstanding, or claim admission to a Christian Church; or should we be in it already, and claim to continue our situation, surely they would not be obliged to comply. If so our rite of private judgement must interfere with that of others, whose whole judgement tells them that there can be no fellowship between light and darkness, or communion between him that believeth and an infidel. If the liberty of the gospel consist in a right of fellowship with Christian Churches whatever be our principles, it will follow not only that unbelievers may claim visible communion with believers, but that no exclusions for immorality can be justified provided the party insists that his sentiments are in harmony with his practice. There is a great variety of opinion as to what is morality, as well as to what is truth. One loose character believes in polygamy, another in concubinage, and a third can see no harm in fornication, nor even in adultery, provided it be undiscovered. (Such was the morality taught by Mr *Hume*.)⁷⁶

Fuller suggests that in the New Testament in cases of notorious and complicated wickedness exclusion was to be immediate - notorious evils should meet with public rebuke - but there are also lesser faults and directions are given for recovering these offenders, without any mention of exclusion, immediate or ultimate. A watchful eye should be kept on the state of the church, and of particular members, because this may do as much to preserve good order and purity than all other things put together.

If it were duly considered how much the general interests of religion, and even the salvation of men, may be affected by the purity and harmony of Christian Churches, we should tremble at the thought of their being interrupted by us. The planting of a church in a neighbourhood, where the gospel is preached, and the ordinances of Christ administered by their purity, is a great blessing. It is a temple reared for God, in which he deigns to record his name, to meet with humble worshippers, and to bless them. We have seen churches of this description, in the midst of a career of spiritual prosperity, edifying one another in love, and gathering souls to the Redeemers standard, all in a little time, blasted and ruined by some unhappy event that has thrown them into disorder. One of the members has acted disorderly - he is reprov'd - his relations or particular acquaintances take on his side - discipline is interrupted - the Church is divided into parties - hard things are said on both sides - the bond of love is broken - tender minds are grieved, and retire - worship is but thinly attended, and the enjoyment of it is vanished - God's friends mourn in secret, and his enemies triumph, saying aha! so would we have it! O Brethren, It is a serious thing to

occasion the ruin of a Church of Christ! *If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy!* Dearly beloved, farewell. Grace and Peace be with you.⁷⁷

Ordinances Turning to the ordinances of the church, in 1802 Andrew Fuller wrote on the *Practical Uses of Baptism*. He takes for granted that baptism is by immersion only and administered to those who make a credible profession of faith in God, but he goes into a dissertation about the meaning of baptism, starting from Romans 13.14 and that in baptism we have put on Christ.

The allusion is to the putting on of apparel; as when one enters into the service of a prince, puts on his distinguishing attire: and the design of the sacred writer is to remind those of them who had before professed the Jewish religion, that by a solemn act of their own they had, as it were, put off Moses, and put on Christ. There is a putting on of Christ which is internal, and consists in relinquishing the former lusts, and being of the mind of Christ; but that which is here referred to appears to be an open *profession* of his name, to the renouncing of every thing that stood in competition with him.⁷⁸

We have also embraced 'the great salvation which is accomplished by a uniting influence of the sacred Three. We have in effect declared our acquiescence in the freeness of the Father's grace, in the all-sufficient atonement of the Son, and in the sanctifying influence of the holy Spirit: for these are the principle things by which, in the new-testament account of the oeconomy of grace, each is distinguished. Nor can we renounce them, without virtually renouncing our baptism.'⁷⁹ He then develops the idea of death and resurrection, which he says seems to mean 'separation from the world'. In this ordinance the line is drawn not only between individuals, but also between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Satan. Moreover, death and resurrection signifies an entrance into a new state of being.

In a few general reflections he observes that the baptism of a number of serious Christians is an interesting and impressive spectacle, which has touched the hearts and called a tear to fall not only from the baptized and their near relatives but also from indifferent spectators.⁸⁰ He ends with a warning lest we make baptism an idol: 'It is more than possible that some may so value themselves on account of their baptism, as to make it a substitute for a life of holiness and universal righteousness.'⁸¹

Moving on to the other ordinance, in 1803 Sutcliff writes on the Lord's Supper:

We begin by remarking the *design* of the institution. It is a positive precept, like the ordinance of believers baptism. We are not to interpret its meaning according to our fancy; but should examine and adhere to its import as explained in the word of God. When he, who is the apostle as well the high priest of our profession, first instituted this solemn ordinance, he accompanied it with this injunction, *This do in remembrance of me*. (Luke xxii.19.) It is the language of instruction. He that runs may read. It is a standing memorial of Christ. When you see the table spread and are about to partake of the bread and wine, think you hear Christ saying, 'Remember me'. Remember who he is. Great is the dignity of his character. Though he

appeared in the form of a servant, and made himself of no reputation, yet he thought it no robbery to be equal with God. He is the brightness of the Father's glory, and the express image of his person. The condescending Jesus, who once sat at the table among his disciples, with all the affection of a Father, and said, 'Remember me'; who still often visits in a spiritual manner his saints in attending divine ordinances, with all the familiarity of a friend, and shews that he yet remembers them, is that character in whose immediate presence, the angels veil their faces.⁸²

The command to remember has the authority of Christ. It is the command of Jesus, and the time when it was given was the night before he was betrayed. The language used is that of instruction - the language of authority - the language of friendship. Sutcliff issues a warning:

And here we cannot forbear to dropping a word to certain individuals, at least in some of our churches, who, without any bar cast in their way by the dispensations of providence, are occasionally absent from the table of the Lord. Your affectionate pastors, in imitation of the blessed Redeemer, take their places, reckoning on the time when they shall meet their respective churches, and commemorate as a family, their common Saviour. They look round: on the right hand, they perceive one is wanting. Perhaps on the left, they discern the seat of another is empty. Did you know the painful sensations they experience on such an occasion; were you aware of the wounds your christian brethren feel, through your conduct; this would be enough to awaken the tenderest sentiments in your souls. But what is this, to the slight you cast upon the blessed Jesus? Is not this the way to grieve the holy Spirit by which you are sealed unto the day of redemption? That Spirit whose delight it is on one hand, to glorify Jesus; and on the other, to see him glorified by you. Might not the Redeemer say, O my people, what have I done unto you, and wherein have I wearied you; testify against me? Have I been a wilderness unto you? Can a maid forget her ornaments; and a bride her attire? Yet my people have forgotten me. Surely, when serious reflection takes place, you must feel ashamed and confounded in your own eyes. Surely in your devout approaches to God, at the close of such a day, wherein you have been guilty of such negligence, your souls must be covered with blushing in his presence. You must bewail your sin, and implore forgiveness with contrition of spirit: with agony of soul, you must wrestle with the Lord, that you may not be permitted to act so unworthily in future. If not, - more affecting still. Persuaded we are, - and, we wish you to recollect, if there was not a time when you would have startled, - perhaps have shuddered at the very idea of your present conduct. How injurious to themselves, - how distressing to others, when any leave their first love! O that such may remember whence they are fallen, repent, and do their first works!⁸³

We need also, says Sutcliff, to be careful of the frame of mind in which we approach the Lord's Table. It is

by an open and stated attendance on this ordinance, you not only avow your faith in Christ as a Saviour, but your *subjection* to him as a Sovereign. Such a conduct may be unintelligible to the men of the world, and expose you to the sneer of the infidel.

Thus your faith may become the subject of ridicule, and your practice of contempt. But remember the animating language of Jesus. *Whosoever shall confess me before men, him will I confess before my Father who is in heaven.*⁸⁴

Sutcliff concludes by telling his hearers to look forward to that time when we shall join the general assembly and church of the first born on high.

If in any instance the church below, bears a striking resemblance to that above, it is when surrounding the Redeemer's board. By faith you view him as sitting at the head of the table, and hear him saying, 'Eat, O friends; and drink, yea drink abundantly O beloved.' At the same time, you indulge a pleasing hope, that before long you shall take your seats at the table where he sits in person; at that table spread with all the rich stores of everlasting love; at that table adorned with all the fruits of paradise. From that table you shall never rise. The feast will be eternal. Then shall you be satisfied.⁸⁵

7. ATTITUDE TO ASSOCIATION

In 1812 Thomas Blundell wrote the *Circular Letter on the Nature Design and Advantages of Association*. He begins by recounting how the Northamptonshire Association was formed almost fifty years earlier and briefly outlines its growth:

This brethren is a summary account of the rise and progress of our association; and it is no slight argument in its favour, that its existence is to be ascribed to the prayers, discourses, and journies of certain individuals, who were the advocates and ornaments of the baptist denomination, and to whose fidelity, zeal, fortitude, and perseverance, under numerous difficulties and hardships, connected with the ministerial office, and the times in which they exercised it, many of you must attribute under divine providence, the high advantage of a standing ministry, and christian fellowship in your towns and villages.⁸⁶

Nature of association Referring to the many eventful and unexpected changes which have taken place over the past fifty years, he continues:

In explaining the nature, and stating the objects of our association, we desire it may be remembered, that they are not political. We are not, and never have been, a disloyal or revolutionary faction. We have not attempted to erect any new, or to demolish any old administration; we have neither cherished nor inculcated hostility against the civil and ecclesiastical polity of the nation. The advisers and promoters of our union had no intention of interfering with the legislative or executive powers of the state; and the public and quiet manner in which all our meetings have been held, and our concerns conducted, through a series of great national difficulty and commotion, must have convinced, we conceive, even the suspicious and illiberal, that our exertions and prosperity are neither prejudicial to the interests of our country, nor inimical to the political measures of its rulers. Whatever opinion we may entertain of public men and public measures, we do not meet to discuss these opinions, or to agitate any questions connected with the affairs of government; and we take this opportunity of again declaring, that we are sincerely attached to our excellent

constitution, and to the family on the throne, by whom we are protected in the enjoyment of our civil and religious liberty. Further: It is not designed that this association should embrace any objects whatever of a secular nature. As voluntary members of civil society, we cannot be supposed to doubt or depreciate the practical utility of civil associations. There appears to be in all creatures, throughout the different gradations and modes of their existence, an active, social principle, which admirably and powerfully disposes them to form various connections with each other; and while man is pre-eminent for the possession of this social tendency, he is capable beyond all other creatures of turning it to valuable purposes. He has the power of forming extensive and intimate, and beneficial alliances with his fellow men. That natural propensity to union which is discovered by persons devoted to the same profession or studies, is not to be viewed as dangerous or criminal, in all cases where the interests of religion are not directly proposed to be advanced. Collections of men, whose object in uniting has been the improvement of agriculture, the extension of commerce, or the cultivation of the liberal arts, have, by the concentration of their wisdom and efforts, not only enriched and distinguished themselves, but contributed to the temporal prosperity of the community, and conferred lasting blessings on posterity. But while the agriculturist, the merchant, and the philosopher, enrich, enlighten, and polish society, it is more in unison with our association, and more congenial to our habits and tastes as christians, to watch over and peaceably extend the kingdom of our blessed Redeemer, to use all means in our power to facilitate the conversion of sinners, to give publicity and influence to the grand principles we have embraced; and by discharging all those reciprocal offices of peace, charity and consolation, in which the essence, evidence, and practice of personal piety consists, to emulate each other in love and good works.

On such an occasion as the present, it seems proper also to avow the constitution of this association does not in the smallest degree interfere with the independence of such churches as compose it. An episcopal convocation, or presbyterian synod, is both in its principle and operation totally different from our assembly. Our churches are not more independent of the state than they are of each other. The ministers and messengers, when collected, possess no accumulation of power, they impose no articles of faith, exercise no church discipline, confer no dignities, nominate to no church offices. The power of excluding, of censuring, or of restoring any member of the churches does not reside in this body. The pastors and representatives of these societies, which, owing to the situation, number, opulence, gifts, and other adventitious circumstances, acquire a sort of superiority in the denomination, have, in this meeting, no dominion over the brethren belonging to the smallest society. We all meet as equals, as the children of one parent, or as fellow servants of one master, even Christ, who is the sovereign and the saviour of his church.

Our connexion with each other is religious, and intended to instruct and establish us in the unity and communion of saints. But while the members of this association disclaim all ideas of invading the liberties and privileges of the churches - while they maintain and propagate the doctrine, that each church has full power to govern its own members, and to manage all its temporal and spiritual concerns, without making appeals, or rendering account to any - while, from religious principle as much as from motives of prudence and delicacy, they are never forward to intermeddle with

those unhappy contentions which too often disturb, divide, and dishonour all classes of christians - in some cases of difficulty and trouble they have been prevailed on to give their counsel and assistance, and there have been instances in which their efforts to revive declining interests, to prevent or repair breaches, to remove jealousies, to cool animosities, and to conciliate adverse parties, have been crowned with success.

In referring more directly to the objects and advantages which were proposed to be obtained in forming this association, it is necessary to recollect, that before this annual meeting was fixed, there was no general meeting at which the different ministers had personal intercourse. The churches being fewer in number, inferior in respectability, more widely dispersed, more confined to obscure places, and the facilities and practice of travelling being less than at the present time, the ministers saw each other but seldom, had not the benefit of each other's conversation, counsels, and services, knew but little of each other's experience as christians, or of their labours trials and successes as ministers. In short, though devoted to the same honourable and holy employment, though found in the same class of protestant Dissenters, though similar to each other in articles of faith and modes of worship, they have adopted no specific means of ascertaining, uniting, and rendering more efficient their resources. To obviate these inconveniences, to supply in some measure these deficiencies, it was judged expedient, as we stated at the beginning of our letter, to form an association, which should at once secure to the ministers, and to such christian friends as could avail themselves of the time and place of meeting, a personal interview, promote a more particular and generous attachment amongst them, and throw light on the state of religion in their respective churches.

By the letters which are sent from the various churches, containing, as is generally known, a candid account of the most important changes which have occurred during the preceding year, we have always been furnished with materials for prayer and praise, for deep reflection, humiliation, and renewed exertions; the tears of sorrow and joy have often been shed, the accents of grateful triumph, and of humble supplication have often been uttered with peculiar feeling and effect on this occasion; we have enlarged our natural sympathies, we have recognized a kindred spirit, we have lamented our imperfections, realized our obligations and the ground of our dependence afresh; and by participating in the same hopes and fears, we have made each other's happiness and distresses our own, and drawn more closely the bond of our union.

The public religious exercises connected with the association ought not to be passed over unnoticed, when we are enumerating its advantages. We are not disposed to assert the absolute necessity of these services, to exaggerate their utility, to overrate the quantity of good they produce, or even to deny or to conceal those trifling inconveniences with which they are attended. We know that the regular times appointed for public worship are numerous, and that this meeting can be attended by a small minority only of the persons to whom it is supposed to be peculiarly interesting; but we think it is impossible for christians to come together, actuated by the pure desire of glorifying God and edifying each other, without receiving and imparting benefit.⁸⁷

Blundell claims that no other argument for the Association is really needed than the monthly meetings for prayer resulting from the 1784 Prayer Call, to which we have

already referred.

Leaving this letter, two other matters of the attitude to association need to be remarked on - giving and authority.

Giving The Association Fund is first mentioned in 1779, and its design is explained in the Letter of 1783. Mr Beeby Wallis was the first Treasurer, and basically the fund was intended to help weak churches, encourage village preaching, help ministers visit other associate churches, give relief to ministers, repair places of worship, assist distant destitute churches pay for supplies, help ministers come to association, and pay any shortfall in printing and selling the circular letters (any profit would go to this fund). It is obvious from the minutes that there was never any large surplus in this fund, but at every association gathering help from the fund was dispensed and it served a very useful purpose.⁸⁸

The second element in this was Mr Trinder's Fund: Mr Trinder was Association Treasurer and member of College Street Northampton, and under the terms of his will, the Fund was set up in 1795 to help the poorest and most necessitous ministers.⁸⁹

Thirdly there was the Provident Fund. In the 1815 Circular Letter, Andrew Fuller wrote about the situation of the widows and orphans of Christian Ministers. Fuller died before the Association meeting at which it was delivered but, as a result of this letter, the Provident Fund came into existence, with John Cooper Gotch as first treasurer and John Keen Hall as first secretary. Only the interest was to be used, and the capital preserved. Rules appended to the Circular Letter of 1815 state who is eligible to join, what the subscriptions are and what the payments out will be, e.g. a widow with no child under fifteen would receive £40, but with four or more children under fifteen the payment would be £100. The Provident Society was one of the earliest funds for the relief of ministers in retirement or sickness and for widows. It continued in existence until it was merged with the Superannuation Fund of the Baptist Union in 1927.⁹⁰

Authority The Association in these days seems to have been given a 'delegated up' power by the member churches, which appeal to it in cases of dispute and other matters. For example, the Breviates of 1805 say that the Ministers and Messengers deliberated 'on the case of our friends at Loscoe and Swanwick'. It would appear that the mother church did not want to let the daughter church go free.⁹¹ The Association resolved that the latter church, as well as the former, should be acknowledged as in connexion with this Association. A Letter was accordingly addressed to the church at Loscoe, signed by the Moderator. On the other hand, when members of the church at Guilsborough left to set up a church at Ravensthorpe, as noted in the footnote to the Statistics of 1816, this Ravensthorpe church was never recognized by the Association.⁹² The church at Ivinghoe came into the Association in 1806 but it formally requested permission in 1813 to withdraw from the Northamptonshire Association to join a newly formed association

which was nearer. This 'brotherly request' was granted.⁹³

During this period the case that caused the Association most problems was that of the church at Friar Lane, Nottingham, in 1803. The Breviates state, 'Half-past nine. Met to consider a case referred to the Association from the Pastor and Church assembling in Friar-Lane, Nottingham, and laid before us in writing by each, stating an unhappy dispute between them. After the most cool and tender deliberation upon it for some hours, and free conversation with both parties, we were unanimous in the opinion we formed, and the advice proper to be given them, which were communicated to each in writing.'⁹⁴ The extant correspondence shows how much heartache and worry lay behind this bald statement. The case arose from the excommunication of the son, Richard Hopper jun., of the minister, Richard Hopper. This act finally took place in the absence of Richard Hopper sen., who was on holiday at Scarborough. The grounds for the excommunication of his son were that he participated in cricket, billiards, dancing and choral singing. His father claimed that it was an illegal church meeting. After much acrimonious correspondence between him and the church meeting, both sides appealed to the Association. The Association's reply reads as follows:

At the Baptist Association holden at Sheephead in Leicestershire on the 31st of May and the 2nd and 3rd of June 1803; an unhappy dispute existing in the Baptist Church meeting in Friar Lane, Nottingham, between the Pastor and the Church, occasioned by the exclusion of Mr Richard Hopper Junr from the said society, by the consent of both parties, was taken into serious consideration. A written statement of the case, drawn up by each party, was submitted to our attention. The Ministers and Messengers present, after carefully attending to each narrative, and conversing with both the parties unanimously agreed in the following particular.

1. In that the above act of discipline was not only right in itself but the *motive* of the Church in executing appears to us to be praiseworthy.
2. That respecting the manner in which it was done (and which is the whole with which Mr Hopper expresses himself dissatisfied) as to the air and tone with which words were spoken, and messages delivered we can be no proper judges, yet we perceive there have been various misunderstandings, and some apparent instances of unkindness from individuals towards their Pastor; but we are very sorry to be obliged to say of an aged and hitherto respected brother; that his resentments have been excessive, and his language on various occasions highly unbecoming a Christian, and still more a Christian Minister. With much concern, we must add, a greater reluctance to concession appears on his side than on that of the Church.
3. That we wish, if it were possible, for both parties to acknowledge they have in some respects been in the wrong, be willing to forgive and be forgiven and to bury the whole in oblivion.
4. That if there be no hope of this, we affectionately intreat brother Hopper reluctantly and peaceably to Resign his pastoral office.
5. If this be not acceded to, we must leave it to the Church to act in the affair as they think right.

Signed in behalf of the Association by
John Sutcliff, Moderator.

The church accepted the decision of the Association, and Richard Hopper resigned the pastorate, as the Association had suggested.⁹⁵ Such was the delegated authority of the Association when assembled.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The matters we have looked at have only dealt with the structure and practice of the Association and its constituent churches during the period under review. A study of the theology of the period as set out in these Letters would call for much more work. Nevertheless, there seem to be many lessons from our forebears in the faith, which can be interpreted into today's situation and circumstances.

NOTES

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| 52 | The Association Circular Letters and other records are now deposited in the Northamptonshire County Record Office, Wootton Park, Northampton. There is also a bound set of Circular Letters in the Archive Room at the Fuller Baptist Church, Kettering, under the keeping of Mr J. Pemble. Reference to the Letters in these notes will be by NBA followed by the year. NBA 1786 p.3. | 72 | NBA 1778 p.11. |
| 53 | NBA 1786 p.4. | 73 | NBA 1799 p.5. |
| 54 | NBA 1786 p.7f. | 74 | NBA 1799 p.6f. |
| 55 | NBA 1786 p.9. | 75 | NBA 1799 p.9. |
| 56 | NBA 1786 p.10. | 76 | NBA 1799 p.11f. |
| 57 | NBA 1786 p.11. | 77 | NBA 1799 p.15. |
| 58 | NBA 1800 p.6. | 78 | NBA 1802 p.3. |
| 59 | NBA 1800 p.9. | 79 | NBA 1802 p.4. |
| 60 | NBA 1800 p.9. | 80 | NBA 1802 p.8f. |
| 61 | NBA 1801 p.2. | 81 | NBA 1802 p.10. |
| 62 | NBA 1801 p.3ff. | 82 | NBA 1803 p.2f. |
| 63 | NBA 1801 p.11. | 83 | NBA 1803 p.6. |
| 64 | NBA 1777 p.4. | 84 | NBA 1803 p.9. |
| 65 | NBA 1777 p.7. | 85 | NBA 1803 p.10. |
| 66 | NBA 1777 p.7. | 86 | NBA 1812 p.2f. |
| 67 | NBA 1777 p.8. | 87 | NBA 1812 p.3ff. |
| 68 | NBA 1777 p.14f. | 88 | NBA 1779 & 1783; see also Elwyn, <i>op.cit.</i> p.24f. |
| 69 | NBA 1778 p.2. | 89 | NBA 1795; cf Elwyn <i>op.cit.</i> p.26. |
| 70 | NBA 1778 p.3f. | 90 | NBA 1813; NBA 1815; cf Elwyn <i>op.cit.</i> p.27. |
| 71 | NBA 1778 p.6. | 91 | NBA 1805 Breviates. |
| | | 92 | NBA 1816 Statistics. |
| | | 93 | NBA 1813 Breviates. |
| | | 94 | NBA 1803 Breviates. |
| | | 95 | Bundle of Letters, labelled Friar Lane Nottingham 1803 in the Northamptonshire Records Office. |

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