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# **“Emblem of the throng that praise the Lamb”: the Northamptonshire Association in the long eighteenth century**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Welsh pastor Benjamin Francis (1734–1799), pastor of the Horsley Baptist church in Gloucestershire, composed a poem entitled “The Association.” on the annual assemblies, where God’s people could be free to receive wise counsel and discuss in love non-essential issues on which they disagreed. The binding force on the conscience was Scripture. These meetings of eighteenth-century Baptists had a great impact for good in the Baptist denomination, the larger Evangelical circles, and in fact, their impact was felt throughout the world generally.

**KEY WORDS:** association, Scripture, circular letters, doctrine of the Trinity, missionary vision.

## *The ideal in Benjamin Francis’ “The Association”*

Around 1790, the Welsh pastor Benjamin Francis (1734–1799), pastor of the Baptist church at Horsley, Gloucestershire, wrote a lengthy poem that he entitled “The Association,” a key section of which runs thus:

Thee, bless’d assembly! emblem of the throng  
That praise the Lamb in one harmonious song  
On Zion’s hills where joys celestial flow,  
The countless throng redeem’d from sin and woe;  
Thee, bless’d assembly, have I oft survey’d,  
With sweet complacence, charmingly array’d  
In robes of truth, of sanctity and love,  
Resembling saints and seraphim above.  
No worldly motive, and no base design,  
But love of truth and purity divine,

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With pious zeal for the Redeemer's cause,  
 That first conven'd thee and ordain'd thy laws,  
 While Christian friendship join'd her aid apace,  
 To give thee strength, stability, and grace.  
 ... The sacred page thy only rule and guide,  
 "Thus saith the Lord," shall thy debates decide;  
 While charity wide spreads her balmy wings  
 O'er different notions, in indifferent things,  
 And graceful order, walking hand in hand  
 With cheerful freedom, leads her willing band.  
 Thy bond of union, truth, and love divine;  
 Immortal honours, wealth, and pleasures, thine:  
 One common interest, interest of the soul,  
 The good of all, in thee directs the whole. ...  
 In thee, the guardians of the churches' weal,  
 Whose bosoms glow with unabating zeal,  
 With balmy counsel their disorders heal,  
 And truth and love and purity promote  
 Among the sheep, Immanuel's blood has bought.  
 In thee, impartial discipline maintains  
 Harmonious order, but aloud disclaims  
 All human force to rule the human mind,  
 Impose opinions and the conscience bind.<sup>23</sup>

To be sure, this is an idealistic rendition, yet it enables us to see what one eighteenth-century Baptist regarded as important about these annual assemblies. For Francis, they were times when sage advice could be sought and given, when God's people could be free to discuss in love and without rancour non-essential issues on which they disagreed, and when the sole binding force on the

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Francis, "The Association: A Poem, Most respectfully addressed to the Members of Each Baptist Association" in John Rippon, ed., *The Baptist Annual Register for 1790, 1791, 1792, and Part of 1793* (London, 1793), between 1:16–17 [lines 21–34, 43–52, 129–137]. This poem runs four pages and is inserted without pagination between pages 16 and 17.

<sup>3</sup> "The Association" in Rippon, ed., *Baptist Annual Register*, 1:17, 18, 20.

conscience was Scripture alone.<sup>4</sup> Most significantly, Francis saw in these gatherings a visible token—in his words, an “emblem”—of the unity and joy that fills the saints in heaven as they worship Christ the Lamb.

*The Northamptonshire Association in the 1760s and 1770s*

Francis saw the association as the place where

... the guardians of the churches' weal,  
Whose bosoms glow with unabating zeal,  
With balmy counsel their disorders heal,  
And truth and love and purity promote  
Among the sheep, Immanuel's blood has bought.

Let us look at one actual association, the Northamptonshire Association, and the way in which “truth and love and purity” were generally and then specifically promoted in its annual meetings.

In October of 1764 plans were drawn up by William Walker (d.1792), the pastor of Olney Baptist Church in Buckinghamshire (see map), and five other pastors for the inaugural meeting of what became the Northamptonshire Association in May, 1765. Two of these pastors came from Northamptonshire churches, Moses Deacon (d.1773) of Walgrave and John Brown (d.1800) of Kettering, while the other three hailed from Leicestershire: Isaac Woodman of Sutton-in-the-Elms, John Evans of Foxton and Robert Hall, Sr. (1728–1791), of Arnesby. What led these six men to contemplate such an association was undoubtedly a consciousness of their own need of fellowship and a recognition of the great help and support their churches could derive from its existence. But they could hardly have envisaged the way in which their association would be instrumental in meeting the needs of many far from their fields, towns and villages. For it was in this association that the Baptist Missionary Society would be conceived and brought to birth before the end of the century, and in the course of the

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<sup>4</sup> Francis' convictions about scriptural authority are also well seen in the following two texts. In the *Circular Letter of the Western Association* (1778), 2, he writes: “we earnestly beseech you carefully to guard against all pernicious errors in doctrine, experience and practice, and to bring all your religious sentiments, feelings, and actions, to the unerring test of God's word, our only infallible rule in matters of religion. Buy the truth, cost what it will, and sell it not for all the world.” Six years later he makes a similar appeal: “Let the authority of Christ preside in your church meetings, and let his word, example, and spirit be the rule, and his glory the end of your church-discipline” [*Circular Letter of the Western Association* (1778), 5].

following century missionaries sent out from this society would take the gospel to such places as far afield as India and Jamaica, China and the Congo.

The first meeting of the association was held at Kettering on May 14–15, 1765, at which time Moses Deacon and William Walker preached.<sup>5</sup> A circular letter was drawn up by John Evans of Foxton to be sent around to the churches who were part of the fledgling association. This first circular letter basically contained a brief report of the substance of Deacon's sermon on Acts 2:42 and that of Walker on 2 Thessalonians 3:1, as well as informing its readers and hearers of the fact that in meeting together the representatives of the churches had experienced "much of the Lord's presence," even as he had promised in Matthew 18:20. This letter was signed by twelve ministers. Handwritten copies were presumably made for all of the churches in the association, for this letter was not printed, though all the later ones would be.<sup>6</sup>

The following year, 1766, saw the association hold its annual meeting in Olney. The ministers and messengers sent by the churches stayed at the Bull Inn, which stood on the western frontage of the market-place. It was a convenient place to stay, since it was scarcely twenty yards from the entrance of the Bull Inn to that of the Baptist meeting-house. The meetings began on the evening of Tuesday, May 6. That evening was taken up with prayer and the ministers present discussing and sharing about their Christian experience. There was also time set apart to read the letters written by the various churches of the association for this very occasion, in which they catalogued their encouragements and discouragements, for it was expected that each of the churches in the association would send a letter to the annual meeting informing their sister congregations of their state, newsworthy items and prayer concerns. The following day—Wednesday, May 7—began with more prayer and sharing. Around 10 o'clock a public service was held at which first Robert Hall, Sr. and then John Brown preached. The evening of this day was also spent in prayer, further consideration of the state of the churches and the giving of direction to Moses Deacon as he drew up the circular letter to be sent around to the churches that year.

The meetings were again at Olney two years later in 1768. At 10 o'clock in the morning of Wednesday, June 15, John Gill (1730–1809), the pastor of the Baptist church in St Albans, Hertfordshire, and the nephew of the famous London Baptist divine of the same name, preached on 2 Corinthians 4:1, followed by John Collett Ryland (1723–1792) on Revelation 3:11. Abraham Booth (1734–1806), who was at that time living in Sutton-in-Ashfield,

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<sup>5</sup> For the early history of the association, see especially T. S. H. Elwyn, *The Northamptonshire Baptist Association* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press Ltd, 1964), 11–35.

<sup>6</sup> For a copy of the letter, see Elwyn, *Northamptonshire Baptist Association*, 12–13.

Nottinghamshire, and who would become one of the leading lights in the Particular Baptist denomination in the late eighteenth century, preached that evening from Acts 11:26. The Anglican minister of Olney, the famous John Newton (1725–1807), and his equally famous friend William Cowper (1731–1800), both of whom lived in Olney, also attended the meetings, Newton having been asked to preach in the evening of June 16. Cowper later wrote down some of his impressions of the meetings in a letter to his aunt, Judith Madan (1702–1781), the mother of the evangelical clergyman Martin Madan (1725–1790), and made mention of the “excellent endowments” that the Lord had given to Booth.<sup>7</sup> From these fairly small beginnings these annual association meetings grew tremendously. In 1774, when the association met in Carlton, Bedfordshire, the public meetings were so thronged that the Baptist church could not contain all who wanted to worship and to hear the preaching. The preachers on that occasion had therefore stood in a fairly spacious window from which the glass had been removed, so that the large numbers outside of the meetinghouse could also easily hear the sermons.

It was a similar situation two years in 1776 later at Olney. On the first day of the association meetings, Tuesday, May 28, the representatives of the churches gathered in the Olney meeting-house. Joshua Symonds (1739–1788), the pastor of the Congregational/Baptist church in Bedford that John Bunyan (1628–1688) had once pastored (today known as Bunyan Meeting), noted in his diary that there were forty-six ministers present, a clear intimation that the public meetings the following day would be well attended. The pastor of Olney Baptist Church, John Sutcliff (1752–1814), opened the meeting that evening with a prayer that was, Symonds tells us, “earnest, lively and fervent—suitable to the occasion.”<sup>8</sup>

The public meetings on the following day were indeed thronged. Unlike the Baptist church in Carlton, though, the Olney meeting-house did not have a spacious window-sill which could serve as a makeshift pulpit. So the large congregation was forced to reassemble under the open sky—*sub dio*, as Newton put it in his diary, for Newton and his friend Cowper were there.<sup>9</sup> An orchard, which backed onto both Cowper’s garden and that of the vicarage where Newton lived, served as the place of worship. A platform was set up on which those who were involved in leading the worship and preaching could stand. A

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<sup>7</sup> William Cowper, Letter to Mrs. Madan, June 18, 1768 in *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, eds James King and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), I, 197.

<sup>8</sup> Joshua Symonds, Diary (1776), entry for May 28–30, 1776 (“Extracts from the Manuscript Diaries of the Rev. Joshua Symonds, pastor of the Bunyan Meeting, Bedford 1766–88,” transcribed H.G. Tibbutt, The Cowper and Newton Museum, Olney).

<sup>9</sup> John Newton, Diary (1773–1805), entry for May 29, 1776 (Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey).

few hundred seats were also procured and arranged for the congregation. Even so there was not enough seating for all who were present and several hundred people had to stand.<sup>10</sup>

The first sermon, by John Evans, was on Psalm 80:19. It was a short sermon and Newton felt that Evans was somewhat flustered by having to preach out of doors. After further prayer, John Ryland, Sr. spoke on Romans 3:27 with power, “originality and zeal.” Newton hoped that “many were impressed” by the sermon. In the evening, there was yet another sermon, this one by Robert Hall, Sr on Revelation 3:22. Again, the congregation, according to Newton, was “very large and attentive.”<sup>11</sup>

The next day, May 30, there was in the afternoon a third public service at which Thomas Dunscombe (1748–1811) of Cote preached—Newton wrote that he “liked him much”—and in the evening Newton himself spoke on Zechariah 2:10. In his diary Newton said that he wanted his preaching not only to comfort the Baptists present, but also to convince them that though he and his fellow Anglicans “are not gathered exactly in their way,” yet God is “pleased to favor” them with his presence. Newton was convinced that God honoured this desire, for he spoke with liberty and, he felt, “with acceptance.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Specifics of a circular letter*

These annual association gatherings also included more private meetings, at which the representatives of the churches would pray together, share about their Christian experience and listen to the circular letter which had been drawn up for that year. At the 1776 gathering it had been the responsibility of Robert Hall, Sr to write the circular letter that would be printed and then circulated among the churches of the association. The topic that was chosen for 1776 was the doctrine of the Trinity, and as we shall see, Hall’s letter proved to be a very timely and popular one.

At the time when he wrote this letter, Hall was the pastor of a small Baptist cause in the village of Arnesby, Leicestershire. He had served in Arnesby since 1753 and it would be his only pastoral charge. He had accepted the call to pastor this work not long after his coming to Baptist convictions. Like John Bunyan, the elder Hall was deeply distressed from a very early age by his own sinfulness. When he was only twelve years old, he was filled with “black despair ... continually ... accompanied with horrid temptations and blasphemies which

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<sup>10</sup> See “Breviates” in Robert Hall, Sr., *The Doctrine of the Trinity stated* (Coventry: J.W. Piercy, 1776), 16.

<sup>11</sup> For the sermons, see “Breviates” in Robert Hall, Sr., *Doctrine of the Trinity stated*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> John Newton, *Diary* (1773–1805), entries for May 29 and 30, 1776.

ought not to be uttered.”<sup>13</sup> From this state he found no lasting relief until he read Paul’s statement in Galatians 4:4–5 that God sent Christ into the world to redeem those who were under the law. This text fully convinced Hall, now in his twenties, that, sinner though he was, he was not outside the bounds of Christ’s redemptive work. For some time after his conversion Hall resisted the idea of believer’s baptism, but, in 1752, having been convinced of its validity through a reading of Samuel Wilson’s *A Scripture Manual* (1750), he was baptized near Hexham, in Northumberland. Five months later he received a call to the ministry and in 1753 was invited to become the pastor of Arnesby Baptist Church.

Arnesby had been one of the founding churches of the Northamptonshire Association and Hall had been active in its affairs right from the initial meeting which had been held in 1764. By 1776 the Arnesby pastor had become a very valued member of the association. Twice already he had been asked to write a circular letter on key issues: in 1768, when he had penned a refutation of what he termed “conditional salvation,” and in 1772, when he had written on the nature of redemption. His 1776 circular letter on the doctrine of the Trinity was on just as foundational a doctrine.

Near the beginning of the letter, Hall mentioned that it was occasioned by “awful departures from, and artful oppositions made to, the fundamental doctrine of a Trinity of Persons in the Godhead.”<sup>14</sup> This denial of orthodox trinitarianism was a prominent feature of the religious landscape for most of the eighteenth-century England, and the 1770s were a decade in which anti-trinitarians were especially vociferous. In 1771 an influential group of around 200 Anglican ministers had signed a petition known as the Feathers Tavern Petition, so named after a tavern in London where they had held their meetings. In this petition they called for the abolition of subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles, the doctrinal basis of the Church of England, in favour of a simple declaration of belief in the Bible. While some of the support for this petition came from clergymen who were definitely trinitarian in belief, it was widely believed that the driving force behind the petition was a group of men who had come to, or were about to, embrace Unitarianism, men such as Theophilus Lindsey (1723–1808). Although the petition was defeated in the House of Commons on February 6, 1772, the debate it had raised did not quickly dissipate.

The following year a number of Dissenters made an abortive attempt to free themselves from the legal obligation of the Toleration Act of 1689, which required that all who dissented from the Church of England and its worship

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<sup>13</sup> John Rippon, *Baptist Annual Register* (London, 1793), 1:226–227.

<sup>14</sup> Hall, *Doctrine of the Trinity stated*, 2.



should nevertheless agree with the bulk of the Thirty-Nine Articles. Again, the most conspicuous support for this measure came from those who were theologically heterodox, in this case, Presbyterians on the verge of Unitarianism, which became the leading form of heterodoxy within English Dissent in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

The Feathers Tavern Petition thus sparked a debate that thrust the doctrine of the Trinity into the public eye, and it is no surprise that the Baptist leaders of the Northamptonshire Association felt that they had to make some sort of statement as to where they stood. Note that first place in the abstract of principles placed on the first page was commitment to the important doctrine of Three equal Persons in the Godhead.”<sup>15</sup> Over against those who denied the deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit, Hall asserted on the basis of Scripture that the Son and his Spirit are “persons properly divine” and, together with the Father, “are the one living and true God.”<sup>16</sup>

Note how Hall begins. First, he affirms that the doctrine of the Trinity is a deep mystery that is not at all absurd — “We do not say God is one, in the same sense in which he is three”—but is beyond the powers of finite human ken. He then notes that the term “person,” though not in Scripture, is a helpful way of affirming the fact that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are all “intelligent agents.”<sup>17</sup>

In seeking to demonstrate that the Holy Spirit is a person Hall turned to those scriptural passages where the Spirit is said to have a mind and a will (Romans 8:27; 1 Corinthians 12:11), where he is said to speak (1 Timothy 4:1; Ezekiel 3:24; Acts 8:29; 10–19–20; 13:2), and where he is spoken of as one with whom believers have fellowship (Philippians 2:1) and whom they can grieve (Ephesians 4:30).<sup>18</sup>

That the Spirit is divine Hall showed from the fact that he does what only God can do. For instance, when we are baptized we are engaged in an act of worship, thus, baptism is in “name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” entails worship of all three persons. Then, the Spirit is involved in the creation of the heavens, the world and its inhabitants (Job 26:13; Genesis 1:2; Job 33:4). In a number of scriptural passages he is also (implicitly) called God (Acts 5:3–4; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). Furthermore, the attributes which Scripture assigns to him are divine ones: he is depicted as omniscient (1 Corinthians 2:10),

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<sup>15</sup> Hall, *Doctrine of the Trinity stated*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Hall, *Doctrine of the Trinity stated*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Hall, *Doctrine of the Trinity stated*, 2–3.

<sup>18</sup> Hall, *Doctrine of the Trinity stated*, 10–11.

omnipresent (Psalm 139:7), and eternal (Hebrews 9:14).<sup>19</sup> Ending on a practical note. Hall concluded that the believer's:

obligations to the Lord the Spirit are great. He is the author and inditer of your Bible ... He is the Lord of the harvest, who prepares and sends forth labourers. He is the author of all edifying gifts to the Church. It is owing to him that you are renewed and strengthened in your minds. Look to him to create in you a clean heart and renew a right spirit within you.<sup>20</sup>

This small work proved to be of such help to Hall's fellow Baptists that a second edition was soon called for and printed in the same year.

### *Friendships*

In his poem on the association, Benjamin Francis noted a key aspect of these association meetings:

Christian friendship join'd her aid apace,  
To give thee strength, stability, and grace.

At the 1776 association meeting in Olney that we have been considering an event took place that is neither recorded in the circular letter penned by Hall nor mentioned in the "Breviates" accompanying this letter." That is the fact that during these three days of meetings the pastor of the Olney Church, John Sutcliff, first made the acquaintance of the one whom C.H. Spurgeon (1834–1892) many years later described as "the greatest theologian" of the nineteenth century, namely, Andrew Fuller (1754–1815). In fact, at the heart of the Northamptonshire Association was a circle of close-knit friends, including Sutcliff, Fuller, William Carey (1761–1834) the missionary, and John Ryland, Jr. (1753–1825), Fuller's biographer and the Principal of Bristol Baptist Academy.<sup>21</sup>

We see this friendship powerfully at work in the following diary entry of John Ryland for January 21, 1788, where he noted that he and the above-mentioned friends spent that winter's day thus:

Brethren, Fuller, Sutcliff, Carey, and I, kept this day as a private fast in my study: read the Epistles to Timothy and Titus; Booth's Charge to Hopkins; Blackerby's Life, in Gillies; and Rogers of Dedham's Sixty Memorials for a Godly Life: and each prayed twice—Carey with singular enlargement and

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<sup>19</sup> Hall, *Doctrine of the Trinity stated*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Hall, *Doctrine of the Trinity stated*, 16.

<sup>21</sup> On these friendships, see Michael A.G. Haykin, *One heart and one soul: John Sutcliff of Olney, his friends, and his times* (Darlington, Co. Durham: Evangelical Press, 1994).

pungency. Our chief design was to implore a revival of the power of godliness in our own souls, in our churches, and in the church at large.<sup>22</sup>

Here, we have these friends praying and reading Scripture together, as well as reading Abraham Booth's (1734–1806) classic ministerial charge to Thomas Hopkins (1759–1787)—*Pastoral Cautions* (1785)<sup>23</sup>—the life of the Puritan Richard Blackerby (1574–1648) as it was published in John Gillies' *Historical Collections Relating to Remarkable Periods of the Success of the Gospel, and Eminent Instruments Employed in Promoting It* (1754), and *Sixty Memorials of a Godly Life*, frequently assigned to John Rogers of Dedham (d.1636), a fiery Puritan preacher. Presumably they discussed the content of what they read and in this way sought to inflame their hearts and strengthen their wills in God's service.

And recall that it was out of this circle of friends that William Carey was sent to India and the modern missionary movement in the English-speaking world set afoot. As missiologist Harry R. Boer put it: "Fuller's insistence on the duty of all men everywhere to believe the gospel ... played a determinative role in the crystallization of Carey's missionary vision."<sup>24</sup> Fuller himself compared their sending of Carey to India as the lowering of him into a deep gold-mine to extract "gold"—precious Indian souls—for God. Fuller and his close friends, Sutcliff and Ryland, had pledged themselves to "hold the ropes" as long as Carey lived.

The meeting together of these eighteenth-century Baptists had an enormous impact for good in the Baptist denomination, in the larger sphere of Evangelicalism, and in the world at large. Who knows what God might do through such Associations today!

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<sup>22</sup> Cited J.E. Ryland, "Memoir" in *Pastoral Memorials* (London: B.J. Holdsworth, 1826), I, 17, note.

<sup>23</sup> See *The Works of Abraham Booth*, ed. Michael A.G. Haykin with Alison E. Haykin (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2006), I, 57–84.

<sup>24</sup> *Pentecost and Missions* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1961), 24.

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