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The North Western Association of Baptist Churches 1860 - 1876

THE North Western Association of Baptist Churches began by breaking away from, and ended by rejoining, the Lancashire and Cheshire Association. It was, above all else, a protest against that local body, and represented an attempt to resist the direction which change and development were taking within the churches generally. As such, it was a product of the times, an historical phenomenon, which illustrates the fundamental rethinking, and the tension which accompanied it, as the Lancashire Baptists progressed to their 'Golden Age,' when they were to lead the rest of the denomination into the paths of co-operation which they themselves had pioneered.¹

The Baptists of the North West recognised that the Victorian Age was proving to be an age of co-operative enterprise. They saw it in 'Commercial Treaties, International Exhibitions, Co-operative Societies, Limited Liability Companies, Amalgamated Railways, and Trade Associations,'² but above all else, they saw it in their own ranks. By way of response to denominational expansion, the Association of Yorkshire and Lancashire churches had divided in 1837, in the hopes that communal fellowship would be the better realized within the confines of smaller units. It was. But rather than solve problems this served to create new ones, for closer union meant that the Lancashire Association, which began by proclaiming its defence of the independence of the separate churches, before long, had extended its activities beyond a voluntary annual meeting and had also devised rules which all were obliged to observe.³ To conservative minds, this meant the abandonment of the traditional denominational tenet of congregational autonomy; and of conservative minds, bred in the days when churches were few, widely dispersed, and isolated, there remained many. In 1837, the Secretary of the new Association admitted, "There are a few other churches agreeing with us in faith and order which have not united in Association and several other Baptist churches holding what we deem the extremes of doctrinal opinion either on one side or the other which as a matter of course do not unite with us in these annual festivals of spiritual affection and joy."⁴

Outside the Lancashire and Cheshire Association, therefore, there continued to exist living witnesses to the independence of the churches, and their existence served as a permanent provocation to those within the Association who sympathized with them. But the difficulty ran deeper than that. Those who had misgivings about the new experimental co-operation were precisely those who also upheld Calvinistic

doctrines from which the denomination generally was breaking away. Of these, Close Communion was the principal characteristic. The problem for those of conservative temperament, therefore, became paradoxical; they wanted to assert the independence of the churches, but they also desired to see their Strict Baptist principles followed by those with whom they were associated.

Had this situation remained merely latent, experience might have resolved the difficulty. This, however, was impossible, for as the idea of active association was progressive, so in fact was the concept of open communion. Both represented the development of an expansive religion. With time both grew, and with time the conservatives became increasingly frustrated. C. M. Birrell emerged as a leader of the Lancashire and Cheshire Association from the start, but in 1838, as he laid the foundation stone of his new Pembroke Chapel in Liverpool—a church formed by a schism over open and close communion—he asserted in his address, “We lose all taste for the intestine conflicts of earlier generations, we fling open wide the gates to all . . . the sacred table to all Christ’s followers—the ordinance of preaching to all ministers called and commissioned by His grace.”⁵ Again in 1838, the Secretary and the Moderator of the Association had a difference over the cento of texts that should accompany the Circular Letter, which had advocated human responsibility for the conversion of souls.⁶ In 1842, Union Chapel, Oxford Road, Manchester, was opened, its members giving it automatic position and authority, but while the church insisted upon having a Baptist minister and taught believers’ baptism, its membership and offices were open to all christians, baptized or not.⁷ Open communion thus became an increasingly live issue. As the first Circular Letter of the North Western Association stated, “For many years a difference of opinion and practice on the subject of communion, in the Lancashire and Cheshire Association of Baptist Churches, had been a source of private dissatisfaction and of occasional public dispute.” Separation was always a possibility, but “no attempt was made, no desire manifested, to interfere with the independency of the churches.”⁸

Open communion was thus no more than a background justification for the break, when it came, with the Lancashire and Cheshire Association. It was a long-standing controversy, which congregational autonomy had prevented from becoming public debate. Indeed the contradictory positions of the conservatives with regard both to cooperation and communion had inhibited them from taking any positive action. As the North Western Association was formed in 1860, it can hardly be said to be the result of a difference that had been tolerated for more than twenty years. Its immediate cause was “the introduction of another controversy into our midst,” a controversy over fundamentalism, intensified by specific, local considerations that centred upon personalities.

In due course, the embryonic, liberal thought that produced a constructive interpretation of association and less exclusive terms of

church membership had to find expression in a modern theology. In 1857, the Lancashire and Cheshire Association was treated to a sermon of this nature, on the central doctrine of the Atonement, and to some it appeared to be frankly 'unscriptural.'⁹ The following year, the Association was asked to pronounce upon the doctrines of this sermon, but it declined to do so, though the day before it had appointed as Moderator the very pastor whom it was asked to judge.¹⁰ In 1859, however, a Circular Letter was authorized on the subject, 'Was the death of Christ a sacrifice for sin?' The answer to the question was argued with all the intensity of orthodoxy that the conservatives could desire, yet to them it merely shifted the form of their criticism against the Association from that of unbiblical doctrine to inconsistency.¹¹ Accordingly, during the subsequent events of that Anniversary, the church at Oswaldtwistle presented a letter of withdrawal, bringing against the Association "the imputation of connivance at important error."¹²

The church at Oswaldtwistle, in fact, holds an essential key to the disenchantment that was about to find widespread expression, and the spirit of that church was expressed in the person of its pastor, Joseph Harbottle. He was by no means an intolerant reactionary. It had been he who had differed with the Calvinistic Moderator, William Giles of Preston, over the texts to be appended to the 1838 Circular Letter; between 1841 and 1849 he had shared a pastorate, and presided over a Theological Academy, with the Rev. David Griffiths, whose thought was certainly not orthodox, and whose sense of personal piety did not preclude the delights of a surreptitious pipe.¹³ But Harbottle gave vent to his own grievances in the 1858 Circular Letter to the Lancashire and Cheshire Association. He was troubled by the modernistic theology which, as an older man of an earlier generation, he sensed to be permeating amongst his colleagues. To him Germany was "a land where infidelity at times occupies the Divinity Chair," and he insisted, "In plain words, *all ministers of God's word ought to give unequivocal proof that they are converted men.*"¹⁴ He took his church out of the Association then, purely because of his sense of duty to uphold fundamentalist, evangelical theology.

But when Joseph Harbottle made such a decision it could by no means end there. In the first place, despite his many eccentricities, he had a reputation for holiness and godliness that expressed itself in philanthropy and personal relations. He had also been a successful pastor, having from 1823 healed the divisions of the Mechpelah church in Accrington and led it on to considerable numerical advances in the late 1830s, and to new premises in Blackburn Road in 1835. In addition, he was of no mean intellectual attainment—typhus alone had prevented him, at the early age of 22 years, from being responsible for the classical department of Horton College under Dr. Steadman; he had been president of his own theological academy for eight years, a venture which was sound enough for George Foster, Cobden's partner, to agree to act as Treasurer; and he was acknowledged in the

U.S.A. as a reviewer of theological treatises.¹⁵ When Harbottle, acting alone, made his protest against the Association, it could not pass unnoticed. But, furthermore, because of the earlier tensions within the Association, he had his sympathizers, who, although their complaints differed, found, in this reputable figure, a person with whom they could identify themselves, if for no other reason than that he also, like them, declined to use the honorary title of 'Reverend,' and did not wear clerical dress.

A dispute which had begun as an argument over orthodoxy thus developed into a disagreement of much wider connotation, and took on also the overtones of personalities. It was, however, this last purely human consideration that exacerbated the problem. Despite his erudition, Harbottle was an essentially simple soul. Sheltered and protected in youth, he came to a manhood unsophisticated, more suitable to the isolation of his native Tottlebank, in the Furness Hills, than to the propinquity of neighbours in an industrial town.¹⁵ His action of taking his church out of the Association therefore, not unexpectedly, was decidedly impolitic and inane. The sermon that had sparked off the disagreement had been preached by the Rev. Charles Williams, a relatively young pastor, who had been called, in 1851, to the church over which Harbottle had previously exercised his successful ministry.¹⁶ Williams had a most unhappy first seven years at the church and even his own call was sufficiently controversial to have put off any lesser man. The climax of his difficulties came in 1858 when part of the membership seceded to form what ultimately became a Strict Baptist Church in Barnes Street, Accrington, and it was this that provoked what appeared to be a direct, personal confrontation, between the old pastor and the new. A month before he withdrew from the Association, Harbottle had officiated at the formation of the church composed of the seceders from Blackburn Road, so that when he disputed Williams' orthodoxy, he was already identified with a body of Baptists who had once been his own people, and who like him had made public protest against Williams. The question of theological truth had taken on the overtones of personal loyalty.¹⁷

Williams himself played no tactful part. He let the question of his own orthodoxy become the cause of union between those who disputed biblical terms of membership and those who disputed specific biblical doctrines. Nor did he avoid personal attacks particularly. In a church that gave him ample evidence of its narrowness, he began by taking a tolerant attitude; an early sermon ran:—"I take my stand with the extreme Calvinist, with the late Mr. Gadsby for instance, and I say that God has elected some souls to be His. . . . At the same time I take my stand with the extremist Arminian, with good John Wesley for instance, and I say that there is room in the heart of God for all, that there is provision in the work of Christ for all."¹⁸ Williams was also frankly critical of the recent history of the church, even to the point of disparaging the years of comparative revival that had marked the end of Harbottle's ministry. Furthermore not only

did he adopt a liberal attitude towards communion, but he deliberately ignored denominational divisions, at one point working with other dissenters in a campaign against the Easter Dues of the local Established Church—a campaign in which he approached the popular acclaim of a demagogue.¹⁹ He committed a final impolitic act at the centenary of Blackburn Road in 1860. He gave his controversial opinions public expression in the paper he read on the history of the church, later publishing the paper in booklet form;²⁰ and this, in the middle of the dispute with Harbottle. It was perhaps a fitting conclusion to Williams' provocative behaviour that, in 1864, he should resign his pastorate over the question of open or close communion in his church.²¹

For the immediate future, however, when the church at Oswaldtwistle withdrew from the Association, his conduct and that of Harbottle, had both adequately confused the situation. What in many ways was a local clash of character, confined really to Accrington, assumed regional, and thereby, county proportions. This is partly explained by Harbottle's reputation, more perhaps by the geographical position and social influence of Accrington as a regional town, but mostly by the respect that the Blackburn Road church enjoyed among contemporary Baptists. Between 1843 and 1871, about one third of the town's population passed through its schools; it had a burial ground at the old Mechpelah site which was used by members of the denomination throughout the country; and it had been the mother of at least four other Baptist causes in the neighbourhood.²² What really began locally could not be kept local in Accrington; its quarrels received general publicity.

And so Harbottle's 1859 withdrawal sparked off a chain of reaction from which the North Western Association emerged. In September that year, the northern branch of the Baptist Evangelical Society convened a meeting at Bury, where, under its auspices, its members, who were those sympathetic to Harbottle, discussed the situation that had arisen. The outcome was a resolution that "immediate steps be taken to form a Strict Baptist Association in this part of the kingdom," because the existing Association allowed "serious doctrinal errors" to pass "almost without rebuke," and because there existed a need to protect "the churches from further innovation." To put this into effect, ministers and churches, "known to prefer truth to expediency, and who hold . . . that the New Testament alone, apart from human inventions, is the guide of the churches," were invited, with the publication of the resolution, to show their willingness to co-operate by attending a further meeting. This was held in April 1860, when Harbottle was requested to prepare a Doctrinal Basis, together with Rules and Regulations. At a third meeting, the following month, his proposals, after alteration, were accepted as the groundwork of a new Association,²³ and later in the same month, assembled at Goodshaw for its annual assembly, the Lancashire and Cheshire Association was informed that eight churches had withdrawn "to form a separate

organisation."²⁴ On 5 September, at Sunnyside, those churches, with that at Oswaldtwistle and four others, formally organised the North Western Association, which met for its first full session on Wednesday, 22 May 1861.

The first member churches were Barnes Street, Accrington; Ebenezer and Zion, Bacup; Fielden Street, Blackburn; Bury; Latchford, near Warrington; Soho Street, Liverpool; Lumb; Wilmot Street, Manchester; Oswaldtwistle; Sunnyside; Waterbarn; and Waterfoot. Their membership totalled 1,281; in their Sunday Schools, 377 teachers taught 3,108 scholars; 418 other scholars attended their Day and Evening Schools.²⁵ By the end of its career, the Association had included sixteen churches, having been joined by Irwell Terrace, Bacup, and by the only two new causes to be formed since its inauguration, Ebenezer, Rochdale, and Doals. Membership rose to 2,092, the number of Sunday School teachers and scholars to 522 and 4,579 respectively, of Day and Evening pupils to 745.²⁶ Thus, the Association witnessed little growth, and it ended little larger than it began.

Equally unprogressive was the pattern of organization it chose. Union was restricted to a single meeting each year, assembling by rotation at the member churches which had the facilities to accommodate a large gathering. The contemporary concept of association which had developed beyond this eighteenth century ideal,²⁷ was ignored and the loosest form of communal life was arranged. The meetings spanned two days, usually in Whit week, beginning one afternoon and finishing in the evening of the next day. Three sermons were delivered, by preachers chosen respectively on a general vote, in rotation according to the length of official connection with the Association, and as selected by the host church. Attendance at these annual sessions was unlimited, but voting was restricted to all ministers officially connected, in past and present, with a member church, and to the appointed 'messengers,' one to four of whom could be delegated depending on each church's membership. Collections too were to be taken for Association purposes.²⁸ At the first gathering the Association followed a schedule which, though modified in some details, remained in essentials unaltered thereafter. On Wednesday, 22 May, proceedings began, at 2.00 p.m., with a general examination of the Association, by means of statistical statements and the reading of letters. In the evening, the first sermon was preached in a service of Public Worship. The next day opened with a Prayer Meeting at 6.30 a.m. This was followed, at 10.00 a.m., by a second service and sermon, which led directly into the business meeting of the 'ministers and messengers.' At 2.00 p.m., a Public Meeting was held of an exhortatory character, and, at 6.30 p.m., the whole proceedings terminated with a final sermon.²⁹ The North Western Association thus began as little more than the means whereby once a year its churches were presented with an opportunity of fellowship, edification and encouragement, beyond the narrow limits of their local

communities. There was no element of practical co-ordination.

Clearly these could be no final arrangements. Indeed, although the meetings of 1861 did assume this passive, spiritual nature, there was a marked note of disparity between events and the intentions expressed in the adopted Circular Letter. This first Letter was on the Association itself, and after justifying the secession, it turned to discuss the purposes of the Association and the methods by which these purposes would be realized; it was in the attempt to implement the constructive aims then stated that the Association was to make further progress.

Firstly, because it had been in the interests of doctrinal truth, and of the scriptural teaching on church government that they had severed connection with their denominational neighbours, they had to design their new experiment so that it fulfilled the tenet, "There is no appeal from the authority of the New Testament in matters of religion." Hence there was a heavy emphasis on biblical teaching in all their meetings. Three sermons in a total of six sessions meant that personal devotion, piety and experience were a prime consideration. But equally, the Association existed for sectarian reasons, which, though they might be given popular caricature in an exaggerated allegiance to close communion, were in reality better summarized as a determination to apply scripture to all matters. This need was met by the Circular Letters. Each year the Association, in plenary session, chose a member to prepare a paper on a specific subject for the next meeting. There the paper was read before the assembled delegates who voted to accept it, and to send it, embodied in what was in effect a Year Book, as the Association's official missive to the churches. The sectarian, polemical content of these letters is perhaps best illustrated by that of 1864. It was on the topic of 'Lay Agency.' Instead of treating it as a discussion of lay preaching, the writer, John Howe of Waterbarn, first defines the term, because the Association accepts no difference between clergy and laity—the title 'Reverend' is never used in its records—and thereby generalizes the argument, reducing its substance to individual responsibility for evangelism. This then was the normal form which the Letters took. Manifestly it made them platitudinous and argumentative, not given to practical considerations. To overcome this, in 1867, it was decided to introduce a second paper on purely practical matters.⁸⁰ The first was a discussion of the place of Day Schools in Baptist churches and the attitude to be adopted towards government aid; and thereafter every year matters of an administrative nature were debated. Thus the Association made a continuous attempt to apply Scripture to all that was done in the churches.

A second aim of the Association was to bring its members "into closer union and more hearty sympathy with each other." Thus common interests were provided. The Primitive Church Magazine became the recognized journal; missionary work in Sweden initially,⁸¹ but more extensively later in Saxony,⁸² became the object of general

support; after its formation the new ministerial college at Bury received help from and gave help to the associated churches.⁸³ In addition to promoting common causes, the Association also provided a system of united action. At its meetings general resolutions on political topics of the day were formulated and forwarded to the appropriate authority when necessary. In 1862-63, a special committee was created to administer relief to individuals who suffered in the Cotton Famine;⁸⁴ and, more generally, the Association served as a direct link with the Baptist Union.⁸⁴ But if such a centralized function was to exist, an appropriate organization was required, and it was provided in the simplest way. The Association Secretary, from start to finish, was John Howe, pastor at Waterbarn; thus one person created continuity from year to year. From 1864 he was supported by an Association Committee which supervised funds,⁸⁵ but which, in 1871, was extended in number and responsibility so that it could "transact any business connected with the Association which may arise in the interval between the annual meetings."⁸⁶ Two years later, it assumed the further duty of supervizing the support for the Saxon Mission.⁸⁷ In this way, by the common interests it promoted, and by the co-ordination of its administration, the Association strove towards a better sense of union. Yet, never was the churches' independence violated, and the union remained but annual; it is symptomatic that no half-yearly or quarterly meetings were proposed, and that the Committee appears not to have had regular meetings.

With regard to a maintenance of scriptural authority and to a promotion of closer union, the North Western Association met with limited success. However, these did not exhaust its *raison d'être*, for the first Circular Letter had also stated that they must "recognise more distinctly (their) need of the Spirit's influence, and depend constantly on His Almighty power," and that they must have "human agency, toned to the extent of its ability, under the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit."⁸⁸ It was in these two particulars, in spiritual quality and in physical resources, that the Association failed.

With the passage of time, a sourness and a lassitude of spirit crept in. The sourness was produced by restrictive, exclusive puritanism. The Circular Letter of 1863 provided a barrage of argument showing that baptism was to be by immersion, was obligatory, and was a prerequisite to church membership and communion. Having assembled an array of sectarian polemic to instruct the churches, it very indicatively refers to the sentiments such doctrine invoked in the faithful, for it warned, "Cultivate a right spirit, lay aside all bitterness, censoriousness, and rash judgment of others who may differ from you. Unite with them in all things in which you can agree; show you do not separate but when and where conscience, principle, and freedom of action require."⁸⁹ Self-righteous bigotry was an ever-present problem. Its corollary was a repressive code of conduct. A discussion of 'Worldly Conformity, and Its Attendant Evils' criticized, as aspects of self-indulgence and pride, the use of titles, dress "unsuit-

able to our station in life, used to attract rather than to adorn," "Amusements, which neither invigorate the body nor improve the mind," "luxuries of the table."⁴⁰ Similarly, the observance of the Lord's Day meant harsh restraint—"the excitement of company, the gathering together of kindred, the loose habit of visiting friends for the mere purpose of cabal, travelling for pleasure, waste of time in the adornment of person, and the luxuries of the table, should be banished from the sanctities of this Holy Day as alien to its objects."⁴¹ The image thus presented by the Association was hardly calculated to attract, and it is not surprising that a consciousness of outside criticism found expression in the Circular Letters. In 1870, the charge of bigotry is refuted,⁴² in 1875, those of inconsistency and particularism.⁴⁸ Instead of the power of the Holy Spirit being evidenced in their midst, the repulsion of their strict conduct made itself felt.

A concomitant of this was a decline in effectiveness generally. "For number, unanimity, and earnestness, these meetings have not been surpassed by any previous meetings of the Association." So commented the Secretary in 1867.⁴⁴ Yet, in 1870, it was being admitted that the unity of the churches was not as it ought to be;⁴⁵ in 1871, the Secretary confessed "the success attending the labours of some of the brethren is not equal to that enjoyed in former years;"⁴⁶ and in 1874, it was baldly stated that "Judging by the appearance of things, it would seem that the average church life is at present low. In its Godward and man-ward aspects there are signs of extreme debility."⁴⁷ The Association failed to become a spiritual force of any vitality. There is no greater evidence of this than the small increase in numbers over a fifteen-year period, during which time there were added to the Lancashire and Cheshire Association some 37 churches, about 8,000 members, and about 12,000 Sunday School scholars.⁴⁸

Similarly, the fourth general purpose of the North Western Association, the provision of physical resources, was not realized. Small numbers had much to do with this, but nevertheless, though explicable the fact was inescapable. There was a shortage of money, without which no collective action was possible. The Association began with high hope. The last of its rules insisted that each church should make an annual collection "to form a fund for the assistance of weak churches, and for the universal spread of the kingdom of Christ;"⁴⁹ and in 1862, £10 was granted to the cause at Bury, £3 to Manchester, and £7 to Sweden.⁵⁰ These ambitions were soon frustrated however. The collections for 1862 only realized £4 0s. 3½d.,⁵⁰ and in 1864, the ministers and messengers, reminding members of the last rule governing their association, asked them to contribute to central funds.⁵¹ No doubt the Cotton Famine explains this in part, but the fact remains that after 1862, despite the appointment of a Fund Committee and of official auditors, never again was a financial statement published. The true state of affairs emerged in the accounts of the Saxon Mission, issued in 1874. Total receipts reached £116 7s. 6½d., but of this only £20 came out of the Association Fund, and from it

£80 had to be spent as salary for the missionary adopted.⁵³ Financial resources were but limited.

So too were the amenities available. The churches connected with the Association had few facilities. Three examples will suffice to show this. Barnes Street, Accrington, formed in 1859, built a chapel, but it only held 400, it required an appeal to the public at large, and even then, the planned Sunday School had to remain a plan until 1867.⁵⁴ Latchford, near Warrington, built its chapel in 1860, largely as a result of the personal donations of William Williamson, but the structure was so small that the Sunday School was held in a barn.⁵⁴ Providence Chapel, Lumb, was much affected by the American Civil War, and, in 1872, desperately needing both a new school and a new chapel, it could only provide the former.⁵⁵ Thus the churches themselves were often in difficulties trying to provide adequate accommodation for their own local causes. Many were quite unable to accommodate the assembled members of the Association. There is, in consequence, more than a superficial deficiency revealed by the thanks expressed to "all the friends and members of other denominations in the neighbourhood" for the hospitality provided at Bacup in 1864,⁵⁶ and by the need to borrow (of all places) the Blackburn Road Schoolroom at Accrington in 1866.⁵⁷

Perhaps, however, the greatest deficiency was the want of human ability. Harbottle died in 1864. His contribution to the formation of the North Western Association was paramount, and so, from all but the beginning the leader was removed, and no-one came to replace him. Of the pastors who survived him, only H. C. Atkinson of Accrington, T. Griffiths of Bacup, and T. Dawson of Liverpool gained notoriety in the larger fraternity, yet even so, none attained to the national distinction of other contemporary Baptists in Lancashire, Hugh Stowell Brown, C. M. Birrell, Alexander MacLaren, S. H. Booth and Charles Williams. The want of ability made itself felt in the degeneration of overall tone in the Association, especially marked after 1869. It revealed itself in significant details. The new college formed at Bury was commended to the churches, and its principal, Henry Dowson, elected as an honorary member of the Association.⁵⁸ This was in one sense no more than accepted practice. But an ulterior purpose soon betrayed itself. Dawson was quickly utilized. He wrote the next Circular Letter, and thereafter played a disproportionate part in events. Further, so that the advantage gained from the talents of Bury should not be lost, in 1868 the date of Association meetings was moved from June to July permanently to avert a clash with the College's anniversaries.⁵⁹ The deference paid to this academic institution, revealing the Association's own shortcomings, is nowhere more pathetic than in explicit mention of college members who have participated in Association Prayer Meetings. But not even the staff or students from Bury could hide the genuine need of the churches. Consequently, in 1869 and 1874, W. P. Lockhart, the Liverpool merchant-pastor-evangelist, of Scotch Baptist rather than Strict Baptist

persuasion, was employed as preacher; in 1873, A. J. Parry, pastor of Cloughfold, a local church outside of the Association, preached at Oswaldtwistle; and Hugh Stowell Brown was invited for 1875.

Thus the North Western Association, relatively successful in some ways, failed badly in others, and, as a result, the whole venture began to run down. Nevertheless, the Association did not end because it had failed; rather, failure provided the background for other developments, which concluded with the reunion of 1876. The bigotry and separatism that characterized members forced pastors to emphasize co-operation with other Baptists whenever possible; want of money necessitated general appeals to all churches; lack of facilities caused dependence upon amenities not supplied by members only; poor leadership made use of any available talent; in short, the circumstances of the Association rendered it inclusive. It is indicative that as early as 1862 it had agreed to omit the word 'Strict' from the official designation.⁶⁰ By 1874 the Association had co-operated with Particular Baptist enterprises frequently—the Manchester Committee for Cotton Famine Relief in 1863,⁶¹ meetings with other Baptists in 1866,⁶² the Society for the Education of Baptist Ministers' Children in 1871,⁶³ and the Society for the Liberation of Religion from State Patronage and Control in 1874.⁶⁴ This united action with other representatives of the denomination, set against the enforced reliance upon outside assistance, explains much how the Association perceptibly lost its desire to be separated. Never really permitted so to be in practice, its decision to rejoin the body from which it had first seceded was all but natural.

This movement to rejoin was largely passive on the Association's part however. The positive and constructive steps were imposed upon it. At the very time when the Association was first having misgivings, Charles Williams returned to Blackburn Road.⁶⁵ His catholic spirit had been partly responsible for the split in 1860, but now, coupled no doubt with his own desire to eradicate any personal responsibility for that misfortune, it was to work for reunion. From the time of his return, pilot-like, he boarded the drifting North Western Association, and in an already fast-ebbing tide steered it safely back to harbour.

He was helped not least by improved relations in Accrington. From 1871, the successful ministry of H. C. Atkinson at the 'Strict' Church in Barnes Street brought with it a marked relaxation of the defensive exclusiveness of earlier days. This went so far that the church participated in interdenominational events in the town, and Richard Fisk, leading layman in the 1858 secession and the first deacon of Barnes Street, actually asked that Williams preach his funeral sermons.⁶⁶ With old prejudices thus removed, Williams was further strengthened by his election as Secretary to the Lancashire and Cheshire Association in 1871.⁶⁷ Using this authority, he followed up an appeal for union in the Moderator's Address of that year,⁶⁸ by sending a letter to the North Western Association. The approach was rejected, because it

was no more than the private letter of one Secretary to another, but it did inspire the added promise that an official communication would be given "respectful and kindly attention."⁶⁹ Because both Associations met annually and almost simultaneously, two years passed before this exchange had run its course, and every step in negotiations would require a further full twelve months to be effected. Williams therefore tried to hasten proceedings. In 1872, the Lancashire and Cheshire Association reformed its Executive Committee upon a regional basis, one of the divisions being responsible for the north-east area, which was the geographical heart of the North Western Association. Because of the locality of his church, Williams served on this district committee, and thereby was able to gain some of the official recognition required by the Strict Communion Baptists in his negotiations with them. Furthermore, in this same region existed a North Eastern Baptist Union which served as a common platform for home and foreign missionary enterprise for all churches irrespective of their doctrinal convictions. In the region about Accrington then, having allowed time for the North East District Committee to establish itself, Williams was able to act with local authority, and to discuss possible reunion in the local Baptist Union, both without dilatory reference to the annual Associations. The reconciliation was thus negotiated by him, and the only delay that could not be avoided was final ratification in the plenary sessions of each body. By 1874 he reached the point where he could attend North Western Association meetings;⁷⁰ in May 1875, he was able to inform the North East District Committee that a formal invitation would be accepted, and he was authorized to submit an appropriate proposition to act upon this at the impending annual meetings.⁷¹ In June, the North Western Association formally welcomed the invitation which had been subsequently sent to it, and appointed a sub-committee to work out the final terms⁷² upon which the reconciliation was to take place at the annual meetings of 1876.⁷³

So the North Western Association ended. Its achievements were slight, its purposes narrow, and its significance small. No greater evidence of this is needed than the minimal disturbance it caused by its reunion with other local Baptists. The only alterations found necessary to the Regulations of the Lancashire and Cheshire Association were that membership be extended to the tutors of the Rawdon and Manchester Colleges, and that to the bye-law governing the qualification for aid from central funds, be added "irrespective of the practice of the church in relation to the terms of communion in the observance of the Lord's Supper." And yet, despite this, the North Western Association ought not to be forgotten. Its short life signified a turning point in the history of the Baptist denomination. It showed that the prolonged battle against Antinomianism was, at last, over; 'Aggression,' 'extension,' progress, had come to be of paramount importance. C. M. Birrell, first among contemporary local Baptists to gain a national reputation, emphasized this in his Moderator's

Address to the reunited Associations in 1876. The progressive lesson he drew from recent years was that "The spirit . . . which animates these churches is one which looks not only upon itself, but upon the world. They do not suppose that they exist merely for their own comfort and edification, but for the salvation of mankind; and they find that in seeking what is without, they secure what is best within."¹⁴ The North Western Association was a symptom of a denomination adjusting itself to evangelism.

NOTES

¹ See A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, London, 1947, pp. 213-216. W. T. Whitley, *A History of British Baptists*, London, 1923, pp. 319-320, and especially W. T. Whitley, *The Baptists of North West England, 1649-1918*, London and Preston, 1913, pp. 287-292.

² Circular Letters, North Western Association, 1869, p. 5. Hereafter, C.L., N.W.A. These are in a leather bound volume held at the Manchester Baptist Offices.

³ Manuscript Minutes of the Lancashire and Cheshire Association, Wed., 11.6.1851, 2.00 p.m. Hereafter MMS.M., L. & C.A. These minutes are in a large foolscap volume held by the Manchester Baptist Office.

⁴ MMS.M., L. & C.A., Introduction.

⁵ Ian Sellers, *Salute to Pembroke; the Story of the Rise, Progress, Decline and Fall of a Most Remarkable Dissenting Congregation*, Typescript, 1960, p. 5. Copies in Liverpool Record Office, Liverpool University Library, and the Northern Baptist College Library.

⁶ Robert J. V. Wylie, *The Baptist Churches of Accrington and District*, Accrington, 1923, p. 86. The dispute was settled by both publishing separate versions of the Letter, bearing the texts they individually preferred.

⁷ Anon., *Union Chapel, Oxford Road, 1869-1919*, Manchester, 1919. (No page numbers.)

⁸ C.L., N.W.A., 1861, p. 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰ MMS.M., L. & C.A., Thurs. 27.5.1858, 2.00 p.m., and Wed. 26.5.1858, 2.00 p.m., respectively.

¹¹ C.L., N.W.A., 1861, p. 6.

¹² MMS.M., L. & C.A., Thurs. 16.6.1859, 2.30 p.m., Resol. 7.

¹³ Wylie, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-114, and pp. 128 ff.

¹⁴ Circular Letters, Lancashire and Cheshire Association (hereafter C.L., L. & C.A.), 1958, pp. 8-10.

¹⁵ Wylie, *op. cit.*, pp. 78 ff.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-142.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 301-304.

¹⁸ Underwood, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

¹⁹ Wylie, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-137.

²⁰ Charles Williams, *The Baptists of Accrington, Lancashire, A Brief History of the Church and Congregation Worshipping in Blackburn Road Chapel*, Accrington, 1860.

²¹ Wylie, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-3.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 101-106.

²³ C.L., N.W.A., 1861, p. 6.

²⁴ MMS.M., L. & C.A., Tues. 29.5.1860, 2.00 p.m.

²⁵ C.L., N.W.A., 1861, p. 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1874, p. 18.

²⁷ Cf. Whitley, *Hist. of Brit. Bapts.*, p. 223.

²⁸ C.L., N.W.A., 1861, p. 4, Abstract of Rules and Regulations.

- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 15 & 16.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1867, p. 14.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 1862, p. 18, and 1864, p. 14.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 1866, p. 14, for first recommendation of the German missionary work. The interest had its place in the proceedings of every year from then onwards, the missionaries involved occasionally addressed the Association, and eventually the Saxon Mission's Report was published with the Circular Letters.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 1867, p. 13.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1863, p. 15.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1864, p. 15.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1871, p. 11.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1873, p. 12.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1861, p. 12.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1862, p. 13.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1868, p. 6.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1872, p. 8.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 1870, p. 5.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1875, p. 12.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1867, p. 14.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1870, p. 5.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1871, p. 12.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1874, p. 5.
- ⁴⁸ C.L., L. & C.A., 1876, p. 8.
- ⁴⁹ C.L., N.W.A., 1861, p. 4.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1862, p. 18.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1864, p. 15.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 1874, p. 14.
- ⁵³ Wylie, *op. cit.*, pp. 305-313.
- ⁵⁴ Anon. *Bethel Baptist Church, Latchford—Centenary of the Church, 1952*, Wigan, n.d.
- ⁵⁵ Annie Buckley, *History of Providence Baptists Chapel, Lumb, Rawtenstall, 1928*, pp. 63-65.
- ⁵⁶ C.L., N.W.A., 1864, p. 15.
- ⁵⁷ Wylie, *op. cit.*, p. 312.
- ⁵⁸ C.L., N.W.A., 1867, p. 14.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1868, p. 13.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1862, p. 18.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1863, p. 16.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 1866, p. 13.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1871, p. 11.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1874, p. 16.
- ⁶⁵ Wylie, *op. cit.*, p. 162.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 313-316.
- ⁶⁷ MMS.M., L. & C.A., Wed. 14.6.1871, 3.00 p.m., Resol. 4.
- ⁶⁸ C.L., L. & C.A., 1871, p. 9.
- ⁶⁹ C.L., N.W.A., 1872, p. 13.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1874, p. 15.
- ⁷¹ Manuscript Minutes of the Lancashire and Cheshire Association Committee—North East District, 20.5.1875. These Minutes are held by the Manchester Baptist Office, together with the original records of various other bodies connected with the Association.
- ⁷² C.L., N.W.A., 1875, p. 25.
- ⁷³ C.L., L. & C.A., 1876, p. 7.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.