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

In 1964 I wrote a short history of the Association for its bi-centenary, and during the course of that work I read a number of the Circular Letters and was intrigued by their contents. But as this was only to be a short history, there was no place for a detailed examination of these Letters. After the publication of the history I had a letter from Geoffrey Nuttall, urging me to do some more work on the early history of the Association and its thoughts and theology. A conversation with Dr Payne, also conveyed the necessity for someone somewhen to do some work on these Letters.

The time was not ripe for me at that time, as I had just moved to a busy new estate pastorate, and later into Industrial Mission. But I still had a desire at the back of the mind to do a more detailed examination of the Association's history. With retirement and the opportunity to move back to the county, this desire has been fulfilled. So for the last two or more years I have been transcribing the Circular Letters up to 1820 and now have them on disc.¹ What follows is my preliminary gleanings from these letters.

1. THE NATURE OF THE CIRCULAR LETTERS

In the bound volume the first letter of 1765 is a handwritten copy of a general letter advocating the interests of the Association and signed by the ministers and messengers of the six founding churches from 1764 and those who had joined them for their meeting at Kettering in May 1765.² The practice for the following letters was to nominate at the annual meeting a subject and writer for the next year. This Letter was then read to the Ministers and Messengers, who could amend and then adopt it for printing and circulating to the members of the association churches. The usual cost seems to have been two pence each, which was to be paid at the next association meeting.

The form of the printed document was quite stylized. The subject title and a statement that it was the circular letter of the Association meeting at its appointed place for the year, was followed by a 'credal' basis of belief. This first appeared in a simple form in 1766, but from 1768 to 1820 hardly varied. It read: 'Maintaining the important doctrines of three equal persons in the Godhead; eternal and personal election; original sin; particular redemption; free justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ; efficacious grace in regeneration; the final perseverance of real believers; the resurrection of the dead; the eternal happiness of the righteous, and everlasting misery of such as die impenitent; with the congregational order of the churches.'³

The next paragraph listed the churches which had assembled. This first appeared in 1768, and consisted of 'To the several Baptist Churches of Christ whom they represent meeting at *Nottingham, Sheepshead, Arnsby, Foxton, Kettering, Walgrave, Northampton, Road, Olney, Calton and St Albans*'.⁴ These chapels, which appear with inconsistent spelling, obviously varied over the years as churches came into and left the Association. Carlton disappeared; Soham, Cambridgeshire, came in and went out; Ivinghoe, Buckinghamshire, entered the Association and then asked permission to join a nearer, newly-formed Association; Thorn became Dunstable, Bedfordshire. By 1820 the list reads:

To the several churches they represent

Meeting at *Derby, Loscoe and Swanwick*, DERBYSHIRE; *Sutton Ashfield, Southwell, Collingham, Newark-upon-Trent, Loughborough and Nottingham*, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE; *Burton-upon-Trent*, STAFFORDSHIRE; *Sheepshead, Leicester, Blaby, Sutton-in-the-Elms, Arnsby, and Foxton*, LEICESTERSHIRE; *Oakham*, RUTLAND; *Gretton, Clipstone, Guilsborough, Braunston, Walgrave, Kettering, Moulton, Road, Bugbrook, Braybrook, and Northampton*, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE; *Olney and Fenny-Stratford*, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE; *Dunstable and Luton*, BEDFORDSHIRE; *St Albans*, HERTFORDSHIRE; and *Lincoln*, LINCOLNSHIRE.⁵

From this list it is clear that the boundaries of the 'Northamptonshire Association' were never those of the county. In fact, it is not clear why the name was chosen, as only two of the founding churches, Kettering and Walgrave, were from Northamptonshire; three were from Leicestershire, Foxton, Arnsby, and Sutton-in-the-Elms, while Olney was in Buckinghamshire. Northampton, and Carlton, Bedfordshire, joined in 1767 and in 1768 Nottingham, Sheepshead, Roade, and St. Albans.⁶

Then followed the letter proper, whose opening paragraphs were always a comment on the state of the Association, as gleaned from the letters from the churches read at the opening session of the annual meeting. They also included brief memorials, for example, on the deaths of Robert Hall senior, John Sutcliffe and Andrew Fuller.

The Minutes or Breviates (both terms are used) outlined the meetings, who preached and on what text, and any decisions regarding the Association's conduct, for example, the 1784 Prayer Call, of which more later. They also give hints of the attendance. It is clear that when the Association Meetings were held near the periphery the attendance was poorer. There are also reports of using the orchard near the Olney church, and of taking the windows out at Carlton so the preacher could stand in the window and address both those inside and outside the building.⁷

From the beginning there was included a 'profit and loss' account of the membership of the Association. The addition side was split into three heads, by Baptism, by Letter, and Restored, and the loss side was by Death, by Dismission (i.e. to other churches), and by Exclusion (i.e. the exercise of church discipline).

It is only from 1811 that these details are given for each member church, with the total membership of each. The 1820 figures, for example, show a number of churches over one hundred members (Arnsby, Clipstone, Dunstable, Kettering, Olney, Roade, and Swanwick), and even a few over two hundred (Luton, Nottingham, and Northampton).⁸

It is this wide geographical spread of the association and the ministers involved in writing the letters that make them important as documents throwing light on church and denominational life. Writers include Robert Hall senior, John Gill (the nephew of the famous commentator), John Collett Ryland, Richard Hopper, John Sutcliffe, Andrew Fuller, John Ryland, Robert Hall junior, and John Keen Hall.⁹ The subjects of the letters cover the basis of belief, prayer, education, government, the ordinances and practices of the churches.

The letters assume that they are written to a largely literate church, though they would have been read to a church meeting. Books are recommended to the associations' members for their perusal, e.g. on redemption, Robert Hall senior says,

Since, as it is forcibly and judiciously expressed by an eminent American divine, 'His repentance which is but of finite worth, when cast into the balance in opposition to his guilt, which is infinite, is lighter than if the smallest atom of matter were flung into one scale, and the whole material system into the other. For there is some proportion between the least atom of matter, and the whole material system: but there is no proportion between finite and infinite. And therefore, as in the eye of the law, so in the eye of an enlighten'd conscience, the most exalted virtue of the most eminent stands for nothing; i.e. is absolutely of no weight at all in the least conceivable degree to counterbalance for any one sin: and so he sensibly needs Christ and free grace along with the chief of sinners.' (Bellamy's *Essay on the Nature and Glory of the Gospel*, p.87).¹⁰

This sort of quotation is not unusual. Moreover, the advertisements list for sale books of a very serious nature on theology, mission and history. For example, in 1771 Robert Hall's *Help to Zion's Travellers*, John Ryland's *Contemplations*, and a printed sermon of Ryland were advertised.¹¹

Not only did the churches have a good literate core, but they also had a fair sprinkling of well-to-do families. The many references to looking after the servants in the household tend to bear this out: 'It is difficult to give particular direction respecting the most proper mode of conducting this service. Your circumstances and occupations are so various, that perhaps no determinate rule could be given to which all families could accede. We can only say, therefore, in general, brethren, that such a season should be chosen as is least liable to interruption; and when all, or most of your domestics can attend.'¹² In talking about the education of children, the letter says 'When the pecuniary circumstances of parents will admit, it is unquestionably their duty to give their children a liberal education'.¹³ Another pointer to the use of wealth comes in a footnote to the letter on humility where

warnings are issued about the style of dress adopted by members:

Persons may doubtless be frequently chargeable with sin on account of the article of dress. *Extravagance in dress* is a sin against the 8th command, as it robs your creditors, your family, or the poor. *Indecent dress* is a sin against the 7th command. And *PRIDE in dress* is a sin against the 1st command, as it idolizes the paltry ornaments of a carcass doomed to putrefaction. But who are guilty of it, is the point to be determined? Doubtless all those who unduly *value themselves* upon such a trifling external thing, whether they think themselves much *preferable* to their neighbours on account of the finery, the neatness, or the plainness of their dress. It has been alleged, that some plain people may pride themselves as much on being *out* of the fashion as others can do upon their being *in* it. This is too true, and there are some who are much in crying out of others pride, that are more affected with their neighbours ring or ribband, than with all the filthiness of their own hearts. But the apostle's *RULE* is, *not* to let any outward apparel be treated as your *chief ornament*, 1 Pet.iii.3. And if you act according to the spirit of it, you will not be likely to be the first or foremost in the fashion, and for the same rule you will not studiously endeavour to be quite the last. You will rather dress below your rank than above it, and yet not aim to draw attention by affected singularity; least of all, will you place religion so much in dress, as to render it needful for all your neighbours to wish for an inspired taylor or mantua-maker, that they might have every garment as exactly according to rule as your own.¹⁴

The 1803 Friar Lane, Nottingham Case features one member of that church, Mr J. Nicholls, who was a hosier. The wealth of some is further born out by the list of donations contributed to the newly formed Provident Society.¹⁵

Some subjects were dealt with in more detail. This article considers attitudes to government, to gifts and education, and to prayer. The second part, to come in a later issue, will look at attitudes to the Lord's Day, church membership and the ordinances, and to the principle of association.

2. ATTITUDE TO GOVERNMENT

From its conception the Association suffered under the burden of the Test and Corporation Acts, as did all the dissenting churches. So in 1789 a minute gives thanks to the Committee of the Three Denominations:

The cordial and unanimous thanks of this association, were voted to the *committee of the three denominations of Protestant Dissenters in London*, for their exertions in attempting to procure a repeal of the *Test and Corporation Acts*; of which the *moderator* was desired to inform their *secretary*, and that we hope they will not be discouraged by the late failure, from using every wise and legal effort to obtain a desirable end. We cannot but think that the abolition of those laws [is] an object that deserves the concurrence of every friend to liberty and religion, not only that protestant dissenters in general, who have ever approved themselves sincere friends to the present Royal Family, and our happy constitution of government, may no longer be debarred from the full possession of those privileges which ought to be

open to all good and faithful subjects, but especially that a stop may be put to the awful *prostitution* of a *divine institution*, which we cannot but consider as a national SIN of enormous magnitude.¹⁶

Here they express loyalty to the constituted government and the royal family, but protest about the disabilities of dissenting members. In 1828 they again expressed thanks to the Right Honourable Lord John Russell and the Right Honourable Lord Holland for their help in the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts.

As the French Revolution developed, the Association made no bones about where Dissenters stood in general in those dark days, appealing for spiritual evangelical liberty alongside civil and religious liberty.

The astonishing Revolution in FRANCE, and the increasing thirst among the nations after *civil* and *religious* Liberty, should greatly encourage us to pray, that they also may enjoy *spiritual and evangelical* Liberty, or the glorious Liberty of the Children of God! --- The revolt of the Pope's own subjects in *Avignon*, where those Antichristian Pontiffs once resided for 70 years, from 1307, affords some additional encouragement to hope for the approaching downfall of mystical Babylon. --- May the ravenous *Beast* DESPOTISM, which has so long supported the *Harlot* FALSE RELIGION, be shortly slain, by the well-tempered, great and strong sword of Jehovah!¹⁷

This paragraph occurs in the middle of a review of the churches both at home and in America and Europe. The same review asks that the civil magistrate should not be involved in putting down Socinianism: 'The sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God is enough for them. Away with all other means of defending evangelical truth. Let us use no weapons in God's cause, but what are taken from his own Armoury. But these we cannot use with too much diligence. The *testimony of Scriptures* and *sound Reason* are the arms of our Warfare.'¹⁸ In other words, governmental interference was not wanted in the realm of heresy - that could best be defeated by scripture and reason.

The Circular Letter of 1804 was wholly devoted to the duty of Christians to the civil government. The letter, written by T. Blundell of Northampton, begins by stating that there is no power but God, and the powers that be are ordained by God, and then argues from scripture that governments must be honoured, as must leadership in the church. Therefore we must obey the civil powers, giving taxes when they are due, and serving the community when asked.

Our property therefore must be freely parted with, when the expenses of government require; and our persons, when government call for them to fill any office, or discharge any duty of the state. To see the penalties of law inflicted on offenders, to suppress insurrections, and contend with foreign enemies are among the duties we owe to civil government, whenever such exertions are legally called for; and by our example of subjection to the laws, and influence in society, to render the post of our governors as safe and easy as possible.¹⁹

The letter goes on to say that protestant Dissenters have been sometimes accused

of disloyalty. The writer admits that some individuals may well have been disloyal, but it behoves Christians to obey the law as long as it does not demand a violation of the laws of God. The reasons given are that poor government is better than anarchy, obedience is due to the civil magistrate for conscience sake, Christians have more reason to be thankful for the blessings of civil government, and finally, it is of great importance for Christians to take no part in any affairs of this life that may incapacitate them for the greater duty of doing good to the souls of men.²⁰ Writing in the course of the Napoleonic Wars about obedience to the civil magistrate, the following statement is made: 'Influenced by this principle, we shall stand aloof from those who deal in contraband goods, pretending that there is no evil in cheating government, and shall avoid the practice of those who avail themselves of every expedient to evade the taxes.'²¹ It was wrong to deal in contraband because it cheated the government; nothing was said about the 'evil of spirits', as it would have been later in the nineteenth century.

3. ATTITUDE TO MINISTERIAL GIFTS

The 1796 Letter written by Blundell of Northampton reviews the encouragement of spiritual gifts and deals with ministry.

The Opening of the 1796 letter notes how the primitive church was remarkable for the number of characters able to teach Christianity; it was a nursery for ministers.²² It goes on to state that any person able to teach others must himself have a good understanding in the things of God, and the Church must become the nursery for this. Even in churches where members possess only the ordinary gifts of praying extempore and conversing on the things of God, it recommends that a few go out on a Sunday evening and preach in an adjacent village, 'where they may find an opening, (or if they reside where the gospel is not preached, in their own place of abode) and hold a meeting, which might, at least, be conducted by reading, praying, and praising God. It afforded us great pleasure, brethren, on reading your letters, to find that in more than one of our churches this practise [*sic*] is actually carried into execution; and that the attention of the poor ignorant people was thereby stirred up. It is not confined to ministers, or to public preaching: Christians without distinction are exhorted to *hold forth the word of life*.'²³

The Letter then proceeds to talk about call to ministry. It warns about the person who may profess a special desire for ministry, claiming this is the call of God and his brethren ought to encourage him; by agreeing the church has given countenance to ignorant, conceited and overbearing characters. Blundell gives certain tests of the call as he sees them in I Timothy 3.1-7. First, the minister must be of blameless character. There are people who, while not receiving any justly grounded admonition, are not amiable among their brethren and do not have a good report from those outside the church, as is necessary for such public station.²⁴ Therefore time must be given. A bishop must not be a novice, and a deacon must first be proved. He warns:

On this account it behoves churches to look with some degree of jealousy on those characters who remove their communion with the hope of receiving that encouragement in one community which they could not obtain in another. Such removals may in some cases be necessary: but as hands were not to be laid *suddenly* on any man, neither should encouragement be given without a thorough acquaintance with the case and character of the party.²⁵

Second, the minister must possess an eminent degree of true religion: it is not enough to be a good man, he must possess the grace of Christ in full measure. Thirdly his principles must be tested against scripture. Two things, Blundell says, have been admitted in ministers in place of evangelical truth, enthusiasm and distinguished abilities.

A person under the influence of the former has supposed himself to be divinely inspired; and that every impression of a text of scripture upon his mind must be the true meaning of it, taught him by the Holy Spirit himself. Hence he neglects to consult the genuine meaning of scripture, and utters for God's word his own wild and indigested conceits. It is not so much a matter of surprize that such characters are found, as of regret that they are not wanting congregations to encourage them. Very different from this, but equally pernicious, is the substitution of talents in the place of principle. To look only on the former, and overlook the latter is an evil of magnitude in the present age. The more talents any man possesseth, whose leading views are at variance with the oracles of God, the greater mischief he is likely to accomplish; and all who any way encourage such preaching assist in planting a battery against the City of God, and partake of the guilt of destroying souls. The dark soul of a publick teacher has even been the chosen habitation of the father of lies; because from thence he can propagate error with the least suspicion, and consequently to the greatest advantage, It was not without reason that the Apostle to the Galatians writes in so pointed a manner: *But though we, or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached, let him be accursed.*²⁶

Fourthly, he must know the truth, and understand that which he is communicating to others, and fifthly, thirst after an increasing knowledge of scripture. Sixthly, he must have a good degree of readiness in communicating his ideas. 'A bishop must be *apt to teach*. It is not every good man, nor every discerning good man that is qualified to teach others. There is a certain aptitude in arranging and communicating our ideas which is of great importance to the christian ministry.'²⁷ Finally, the minister must have an active mind. 'A certain spring of mind is of great importance to the proper discharge of the work of ministry. An indolent character will appropriate that leisure which an exemption from secular employments may afford him to sauntering and visiting from house to house; a practice unfriendly to religion and pregnant with scandal. An active character on the contrary, will ever find employment without being driven to such resources.'²⁸ Worthy characters, Blundell suggests, must be sought out and encouraged, otherwise unworthy ones will press forward.

4. ATTITUDES TO THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN

In 1816 J. Jarman of Nottingham dealt with the education of children. The first principle laid down is that whatever general education we give, the first priority is to communicate religious instruction. Parents, he suggests, are not to excuse themselves from this duty by saying that conversion is God's work. This is a partial view of God's truth. We must sow if we are to reap.²⁹ Therefore we should start early, and should be with our children to be able to instruct them. He then warns:

We should beware of neglecting relative duties, under the pretence of public usefulness. The avocations of some parents render their frequent absence from their families indispensable. But we fear, too many, alas! in their mistaken zeal for public services and institutions, overlook their own children. A desire to do good abroad is laudable; but should never be gratified at the expense of domestic duties. This is an evil to which the professors of Christianity in the present day are peculiarly exposed. Many are not only absent from their families during the week, but almost the whole of the Lord's-day is employed in public. Those, however, who go out to cultivate common land, should certainly first till their own enclosure; or they will perhaps have to witness the gathering in of wheat from a foreign soil, which they have aided in its growth, while they will see thorns from their own ground destined to be burned, and have at last to say, 'the vineyard of others have I kept, but mine own vineyard have I not kept.' Let those take public duties who do not stand in the relation of parents, or who are, by reason of the age of their children, in some degree released from private responsibility; but let us, who have a young charge, be at our proper post, and endeavour to fulfil the duties of our station. Christian mothers should be '*keepers at home*', as they have so many opportunities, and are so eminently fitted for the work of instruction, especially in its early stages.³⁰

Children also need to be trained to habits of obedience and subjection to parental authority, but not by harshness and severity, which makes children lie to their parents to hide their faults. 'A Christian parent should be a king to rule, as well as a prophet to instruct, in his own house. In domestic government, corporeal punishment should be avoided as much as possible, and *never employed in anger*, or without *reluctance*; but the authority of the parent must be established and maintained with firmness and decision.'³¹ Both parents must agree and co-operate in the education of their children, and their example must line up with their instructions.

When it comes to choosing schools for the children, religious principles should govern the choice of masters. Jarman bemoans the fact that so many pious parents send their children to ungodly tutors, where they will associate chiefly with the children of the wicked, see no religious example, and hear no believing prayers.³² If parents pay due heed to their principles, then the children will be placed in the care of dissenting tutors. When the pecuniary circumstances of the parents will admit:

it is unquestionably their duty to give their children a *liberal education*, comprising

the different branches of general knowledge. But it is not equitable to educate children at a great expense, when this cannot be done without injuring other persons. Nor is it right for parents to act under the influence of partiality, in bestowing great expense in the education of one child, to the neglect of others who stand in the same relation, and who have an equal claim on parental attention. The formation of the manners, as well as the instruction of the mind, ought, no doubt, to be attended to in education, that our children may be fitted for the general intercourse of life.³³

Jarman then goes on to give some general considerations to be given due regard in the education of the children. They need to consider the worth of the children's souls, and the magnitude of their eternal interests. It is not enough just to feed, clothe and house the children's bodies from temporal danger, and regard their spiritual welfare as of secondary importance.³⁴ Parents need to reflect on their responsibilities under God, to be faithful, diligent and persevering. Parents need to be reminded that their own comfort in life is connected with the Christian education of their children. Men of the world not only watch them, but also watch their children, and from what they see will draw conclusions to the advantage, or discredit of the parents' principles and characters. The final consideration is that the duty of educating children is vital for the prosperity of the church.

5. ATTITUDE TO PRAYER

It is quite clear that prayer was very important to the Association by the number of references to it, but specifically in two letters, those of 1787 and 1820, and of course in the issuing of the Prayer Call of 1784.

The first of these letters, by Richard Hopper, deals principally with '*family and closet religion*'. The opening declares: 'Religion ought to be the main business of our lives; and religion in the family and the closet makes a considerable part of the christian life. It is here, if any where, that the true christian will be distinguished from others. While many content themselves with such public exercises as fall under the eye of the multitude, the language of the heart is, *As for me, and my house, we will serve the Lord.*'³⁵ The letter then elaborates on what makes up family religion, including the reading of scripture, catechizing the young, not forgetting their duty to their domestics. At proper seasons they should sing a few verses of a psalm or hymn - the lately published collection by John Rippon is recommended. Above all, they should 'attend to family prayer; let not this be omitted on any avoidable account whatever. Let it be regular and constant; and this, we apprehend, it cannot be, unless it be *daily*. Christ taught his disciples to pray for spiritual blessings as often as they prayed for their *daily* bread.'³⁶ Members should consider themselves prophets and priests in their respective families. Morning and evening prayer is recommended, 'Prayer is the key, which in the morning opens to us the treasures of God's mercy, and in the evening shuts us up, as it were, under his protection and safeguard.'³⁷ The manner and time of the service is difficult to specify, but a time should be chosen when all or most of your

domestics can attend. Late services should be avoided, as it is difficult to give the right attention when the body is exhausted. The prayers should not be protracted beyond the grounds of prudence: 'as they not only weary and disgust many of their domestics, and so render the service irksome; but likewise go beyond the fervour of their own affections. Hence it is that a disagreeable languor, and unpleasing tautology are generally the attendants of such services.'³⁸

The letter then goes on to look at closet religion, that which takes place between the individual Christian and God in private; this should not be neglected. It is here that we may pray, pause, reflect and pray again. There are various personal concerns which we cannot, Hopper suggests, express with freedom before any creature.

The letter points out the importance of both family and closet duties. To neglect them is to take leave of common sense and rationality. It becomes us to pay our homage to the author of our being, and supreme governor of the world. While Deists speak of God as the *Father of all creatures*, is it wrong for Christians to come to God, just as children present themselves to a parent, express their wants, commit themselves to the parent's protection and, if they have offended, beg forgiveness?³⁹

Such domestic religious observance is about duty to God, duty to self and family, and also duty to others in society at large. If we glorify God to any purpose, it must be in domestic life: 'If you would know a man's true character, say they, see what he is in secret, in domestic life, when the eye of the world is not upon him.'⁴⁰ 'There is not only a close connexion between one duty and another, but as well between one blessing and another. The public worship of God can never be properly enjoyed as a privilege, any more than performed as a duty, but in conjunction with family religion; and family religion can never be carried on to any good purpose, without a close walking with God in private.'⁴¹ Both the closet and family religion are preparation for public worship and public example.

The third area of duty is to others and this, like other areas of discipleship, also requires prayer:

Family religion is, generally speaking, a blessing to those who are instructed by it, and to society at large. Children are hereby taught to reverence religion; and being taught the good and the right way, are not so readily drawn aside into pernicious errors, and cannot, at so easy a rate, indulge themselves in gross immoralities. These, to say the least, are the effects of godly education. On these accounts, the community at large have a claim upon parents. A family is the first society, and a seminary to all the rest. The whole commonwealth is made up of single persons in divers relations. Towns, congregations, cities and countries, are all made up of several families. To principle and instruct them, therefore, is the way to make good magistrates, good subjects, good husbands, good wives, good masters, good servants, and good neighbours. Loyalty to our king, and love to our country, cannot be better manifested than by a close attention to family government. On this ground, and nothing short of it, we may hope for their future respectability.⁴²

The 1787 letter concludes with the appeal: '*Pray without ceasing*'.

The 1820 letter, probably written by T. Blundell of Northampton, dealt with the efficacy of prayer. Prayer, he suggests, is productive of certain important consequences; many blessings in the Christian life are obtained by prayer and cannot be obtained without it.

When we maintain the Efficacy of Prayer, we do not plead for its meritoriousness. We cannot be saved without faith; yet faith does not merit salvation; so though we cannot obtain blessings without prayer, prayer is not their meritorious cause. Prayer obtains blessings not by merit; but by appointment. Who would say that God preserves us alive, for the merit of eating? We cannot see unless we open our eyes: but would it not be absurd to affirm the blessing of sight to be the reward of opening our eyes? Equally absurd would it be to ascribe merit to prayer, on account of its efficacy.⁴³

The doctrine of the efficacy of prayer, Blundell maintains, is frequently taught in scripture; he quotes various passages including the stories of Ahitophel and Absalom, Hezekiah and the Assyrians, and Elijah, and suggests that 'Ecclesiastical history is full of instances of this kind, shewing us that the prayers of the saints have been fulfilled in the most unlikely situations, and sometimes contrary to the cause of nature. Prayer, like faith, has stopped the mouths of millions; quenched the violence of fire; turned to flight the armies of the aliens.'⁴⁴

The reasons for this efficacy of prayer, he suggests, are fourfold. First, it is founded on the will of God. Secondly, prayer is made efficacious that we may be encouraged to the full acknowledgement of the divine character, because in prayer we recognize all the divine perfections. Thirdly, in the efficacy of prayer, the Father honours the Holy Spirit. What are the prayers of the saints, he asks, but the breath of the Spirit? It is the spirit that makes intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered. Fourthly, in the efficacy of prayer, Christ's mediation is glorified. Blessings are sought for the sake of Christ's mediation, and they are communicated in consequence of Christ's intercession.⁴⁵

Prayer is a soil in which our graces grow and thrive. Whatever prompts the spirit of prayer, increases our faith and hope, our humility and patience; our sanctification is advanced by it; it is a means of delivering us from the vanities of time, of unveiling invisible realities, of bringing us under the influence of the powers of the world to come, of placing us almost beyond the reach of the arrows of our spiritual enemies, in the pavilion of God, and of keeping us in habitual communion with the Father of our spirits.⁴⁶

At the same time we sometimes fail to get an answer to our prayer, but this only shows the efficacy of prayer in a way we did not expect: 'at the very time that we are ready to imagine that God will not answer our prayers, we experience their efficacy in the increase of our humility and spirituality. Sometimes we experience both the direct and indirect Efficacy of Prayer at the same time. This was the case with Jacob, when he said to the angel, "I will not let thee go unless thou bless me":

he obtained his request, deliverance from his brother Esau; and such an increase of his faith, that he was afterwards called Israel, a prince with God.'

That these indirect consequences should flow from prayer, will be manifest from a consideration of its nature. Prayer includes in it the exercise of faith and hope, by bringing us to consider our sins and unworthiness; it naturally leads to repentance and humility, by bringing us to address the Majesty of heaven; it leads to the contemplation of his character, and thus tends to cultivate both adoration and love. As it consists in converse with God, and opens the sight of heaven, it trains us for another and a brighter world.⁴⁷

Since prayer is thus efficacious, again the appeal to *pray without ceasing* is repeated.

The subject of prayer in the association cannot be left without referring to the prayer call of 1784. This appears as a postscript to the breviate of that year's meeting.

P.S. Upon a motion being made to the ministers and messengers of the associate baptist churches assembled at Nottingham, respecting meetings for prayer, to bewail the low estate of religion, and earnestly implore a revival of our churches, and of the general cause of our Redeemer, and for that end to wrestle with God for the effusion of his Holy Spirit, which alone can produce the blessed effect, it was unanimously RESOLVED, to recommend to all our churches and congregations, the spending of one hour in this important exercise, on the first Monday in every calendar month.

We solemnly exhort all the churches in our connexion, to engage heartily and perseveringly in the prosecution of this plan. And thus it may be well to endeavour to keep the same hour, as a token of our unity therein, it is supposed the following scheme may suit many congregations, viz. to meet on the first Monday evening in May, June, and July, from 8 to 9. In Aug. from 7 to 8. Sept. and Oct. from 6 to 7. Nov. Dec. Jan. and Feb. from 5 to 6. March from 6 to 7; and April from 7 to 8. --- Nevertheless if this hour, or even the particular evening, should not suit in particular places, we wish our brethren to fix on one more convenient to themselves.

We hope also that as many of our brethren who live at a distance from our places of worship may not be able to attend there, that as many as are conveniently situated in a village or neighbourhood, will unite in small societies at the same time. And if any single individual should be so situated as not to be able to attend to this duty in society with others, let him retire at the appointed hour, to unite the breath of prayer in private with those who are thus engaged in a more public manner. -- The grand object in prayer is to be, that the Holy Spirit may be poured down on our ministers and churches, that sinners may be converted, the saints edified, the interest of religion revived, and the name of God glorified. And at the same time remember, we trust you will not confine your requests to your own societies, or to your own immediate connection; let the whole interest of the Redeemer be affectionately remembered, and the spread of the gospel to the most distant parts of the habitable globe be the object of your most fervent requests. -- We shall rejoice if any other christian societies of our own and other denominations will unite with us, and do now invite them most cordially to join heart and hand in the attempt.

Who can tell what the consequence of such an united effort in prayer may be! Let

*us plead with God the many gracious promises of his word, which relate to the future success of his gospel. He has said, I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them, I will increase them with men like a flock, Ezek.xxxvi.37. Surely we have love enough to Zion to set apart one hour at a time, twelve times in a year, to seek her welfare.*⁴⁸

Andrew Fuller had preached at the Association meeting in Nottingham and was persuaded to publish his sermon under the title, *Persuasives to general Union in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival and Extent of Real Religion*. He urged seven points, all significant in view of subsequent developments.

- I. Consider Christ's readiness to hear and answer prayer, especially on these subjects...
- II. Consider what the Lord has done in times past, and that in answer to prayer....
- III Let the present religious state of the world be considered to this end...
- IV Consider what God has promised to do for his church in times to come...
- V If we have any regard to the welfare of our countrymen, connexion and friends, let this stimulate us in this work...
- VI Consider what is suggested is so very small...
- VII And lastly. It will not be in vain, whatever the immediate and apparent issues of it...⁴⁹

Thus spoke Fuller. Sutcliff's own appeal said:

The grand object in prayer is to be that the Holy Spirit may be poured down on our ministers and churches, that sinners may be converted, the saints edified, the interest of religion revived, and the name of God glorified. At the same time remember, we trust you will not confine your requests to your own societies; or to your own immediate connexion; let the whole interest of the Redeemer be affectionately remembered, and the spread of the Gospel to the most distant parts of the habitable globe be the object of your fervent requests.⁵⁰

Both these were written before Carey's *Enquiry* and show how people's minds were already working. There had been several previous calls to *days of humiliation, fasting and prayer*, but the 1784 call was re-emphasized in the meetings at Oakham in 1785 when it was resolved that the monthly prayer meetings should be continued. In 1787 at Leicester the decision was again renewed. By this time the neighbouring Warwickshire Association had taken a similar decision, and the movement had spread to the Independents, and the Yorkshire Baptist Churches. From this awakened interest and activity in prayer came the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792, the London Missionary Society in 1795, and the Baptist Union in 1812.⁵¹ This Northamptonshire Association prayer call was one of the most decisive events in the life of in that period, and probably for all Christendom.

NOTES

- 1 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 footnotes will be by NBA followed by the Year.
- 2 Those who signed this letter were, Isaac Woodman (Sutton-in-the-Elms)(Moderator); Moses Deacon (Walgrave); Wm Walker; John Brown(Kettering); Robert Hall(Arnsby); John Evans(Foxton)(probably the writer of the Letter); Thomas Hull; Joseph Clayton; Chr. Hall; John Martin(Sheepshead); Wm Coles; Wm Dickens.
 - 3 NBA 1820
 - 4 NBA 1768
 - 5 NBA 1820
 - 6 Elwyn T S H. *The Northamptonshire Baptist Association A Short History 1764-1964*, Carey-Kingsgate Press. 1964. p.27.
 - 7 Opening sentence of Letter NBA 1819; Minutes NBA 1776; NBA 1774;
 - 8 NBA 1820
 - 9 For complete list see Appendix A in Elwyn op cit p 99ff.
 - 10 NBA 1780 p.5.
 - 11 NBA 1781 and many other years as well.
 - 12 NBA 1787 p.3.
 - 13 NBA 1816 p10.
 - 14 NBA 1784 footnote on p.7.
 - 15 Appendix to NBA 1816
 - 16 NBA 1789 p.14.
 - 17 NBA 1790 p.11
 - 18 NBA 1790 p.12.
 - 19 NBA 1804 p.3.
 - 20 NBA 1820 p.5ff.
 - 21 NBA 1804 p.6.
 - 22 NBA 1796 p.1.
 - 23 NBA 1796 p.3.
 - 24 NBA 1796 p.5ff.
 - 25 NBA 1796 p.5.
 - 26 NBA 1798 p.6.
 - 27 NBA 1796 p.7.
 - 28 NBA 1796 p.8.
 - 29 NBA 1816 p.2f.
 - 30 NBA 1816 p.5f
 - 31 NBA 1816 p.6.
 - 32 NBA 1816 p.8.
 - 33 NBA 1816 p.10.
 - 34 NBA 1816 p.11ff.
 - 35 NBA 1787 p.2.
 - 36 NBA 1787 p.3.
 - 37 NBA 1787 p.3.
 - 38 NBA 1787 p.3.
 - 39 NBA 1787 p.5f.
 - 40 NBA 1787 p.6.
 - 41 NBA 1787 p.6.
 - 42 NBA 1787 p.6.
 - 43 NBA 1820 p.4.
 - 44 NBA 1820 p.5.
 - 45 NBA 1820 p7ff.
 - 46 NBA 1820 p.10.
 - 47 NBA 1820 p.10.
 - 48 NBA 1784 p.12.
 - 49 Elwyn *op.cit.* p16f.
 - 50 Quoted by E A Payne in *The Prayer Call of 1784* p.2, where he states it is from the Circular Letter of the Association but gives no year. It is part of the resolution quoted above from 1784, and it is not clear whether Sutcliff wrote it.
 - 51 E A Payne *op.cit.* p.11f.

THORNTON ELWYN *Treasurer, Baptist Historical Society*

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NEW CONNEXION ORIGINS

Edwin Welch, honorary archivist of the Cheshunt Foundation, biographer of the Countess of Huntingdon, and a good friend of this Society, has contributed a short but authoritative article on New Connexion origins - 'The origins of the New Connexion of General Baptists in Leicestershire' - to *The Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, Volume LXIX, 1995, pp.59-70. Those interested in this strand of Baptist history will surely wish to consult this.