

Local Church Autonomy and the Role of Associations Defined by America’s First Baptist Assembly



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The body of Christ comprises believers from different denominations, traditions, and cultures. The invisible church, often called the “original” Catholic Church, not to be confused with the Roman Catholic Church, consists of any genuine believer in Christ (Philippians 3:20). Doctrinal positions and theology separate the various traditions. Nevertheless, all Bible-believing churches maintain they are part of the extended body of Christ and often have no issues fellowshiping with those outside their practices.

While all traditional, evangelical sects of Christianity acknowledge the invisible church, differences in theology, doctrine, and church polity exist. Although not a salvation issue, the contrast in church autonomy is essential for many denominations. Typically, a church falls within one of three branches of a church structure, the Episcopal, Presbyterian, or Congregational model. Historically, Baptists pride themselves on being devout Congregationalists. Baptists historically affirm that the church’s power is found within the congregation. Such ideas protect their churches from the single, one-person role experienced by the Roman Catholic Church, from whom the Reformers departed.

While the period of the Protestant Reformation shaped the future of Evangelical Christianity, focusing mainly on *Sola scriptura* or Scripture alone, the Reformation also paved the way for a departure from Roman Catholic rule, where the Pope maintained the ultimate authority in church affairs, both locally and universally. Freedom within the church government provided religious liberty, which was lacking for centuries within the faith. The colonists, too, mainly from Great Britain, experienced persecution and suffering at the hands of the King and the structure enforced by the Church of England, very similar to the makeup of the Roman Catholic Church.

Baptists, like other early denominations, arrived on the scene directly from the original Reformation around the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries. While the Southern Baptist Convention formed later in 1845, the model of the denomination's church polity or autonomy remained primarily influenced by the Philadelphia Baptist Associations' 1749 annual meeting. Within this meeting, Benjamin Griffith presented an essay that reaffirmed and established the importance of the church's autonomy for generations to come.

America's First Baptist Association

In order to properly analyze the role of the church and the first Baptist association, it is crucial to evaluate how and why the earliest confederation formed. The English colonies in the New World provided a unique opportunity for believers of Christ. Regardless of their denominational background, religious freedom separated North America from other parts of Europe. More specifically, the Quaker-founded Pennsylvania served as the standard for embracing the notion of freedom of religion. Within the colony, Philadelphia served as a "primary location for Baptists within the

region.”¹ Pennsylvanian Baptists formed the first Baptist church in Pennepek.² This was followed by Baptist churches forming in nearby New Jersey, establishing a group of like-minded Christians within the newly constructed colonies.³ Baptist Historian H. Leon McBeth wrote:

It (Philadelphia Baptist Association) was the first organized Baptist association in America. In 1742 that association adopted a confession destined to shape Baptist theology in America for more than a century and in 1749 issued a carefully reasoned explanation of the power and limitations of an association. By 1770 this association had founded a Baptist college (in Rhode Island), sent out home missionaries, provided a cohesive center for Baptist life throughout America, and was entertaining plans for a Baptist organization to cover the entire country.⁴

The recently formed association undoubtedly set the model for Baptist churches and traditions. While the Baptist churches embraced the idea of local church autonomy and prided themselves as fervent Congregationalists, the early Baptist Americans knew an association assisted their churches and themselves in a unified mission focused on the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. Two particular elements of the original association held great importance. First, as churches continued to form, many congregations lacked a permanent preacher; the association, therefore, provided an opportunity for pastors to notice such needs and assist in pulpit supply. Further, a mission-focus agenda solidified the association’s early years. James L. Clark wrote, “The early missionary outlook of this body was concerned with domestic evangelization only. This remained true for many years after its organization. In 1770 Morgan Edwards

proposed that this body appoint an evangelist to travel and preach in the colonies.”⁵

In the heart of the Great Awakening, denominations differed in their positions and thoughts of revivalism in America. Baptists, particularly those affiliated with the Philadelphia Association, strongly supported the revivalist movement.⁶ By the early eighteenth-century, Baptist churches had formed in the southern colonies of South Carolina, Virginia, and North

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Carolina. With many churches forming, a partition of beliefs separated Baptists too, most notably a separation of “cultural variation and

worship style.”⁷ Further division grew in the southern colonies between Regular and Separate Baptists.

While Baptists agreed on most issues within their theological beliefs and distinctions, each church, pastor, and Baptist often differed, leading to some distinct views. It was within the Philadelphia Baptist Association that the churches of the surrounding area could affirm their doctrinal stances on the probing questions of the day. One such issue was the local church’s authority and the association’s role in church government and practice. Perhaps unknowing of it at the time, Benjamin Griffith’s essay presented in the annual meeting of 1749 laid the foundation for church autonomy for generations to come and continues to be analyzed today. Though a reasonably concise

document, Griffith's essay underscored the importance of the local church and highlighted the role of the association or general assembly.

Benjamin Griffith's 1749 Essay on Church Autonomy

Griffith, a pastor from Montgomery Baptist Church of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, had the opportunity and privilege to present his essay on the role of the local church and association.⁸ All delegates of the annual meeting signed his work, affirming his positions.⁹ In reality, Griffith's essay became a standard, largely used today on the importance of local church government within the Baptist tradition. Likewise, the brief yet decisive analysis also exemplified the importance of the association of churches, a standard seen today within the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention and other state Baptist conventions.

Well aware of the importance of polity organizational standards, Griffith wrote, "An Association is not superior judicature, having such superior power over the churches; but that each church hath a complete power and authority from Jesus Christ."¹⁰ Clearly, in line with the most critical parts of the Protestant Reformation, Griffith placed the church in Jesus Christ's hands. Like the Reformers before him, Griffith embraced *Sola scriptura* and knew the Lord reigned over His sheep (Ephesians 5:23-27). Simply, the standards needed to be the Savior's teachings and principles. Southern Baptist Robbie Trent wrote the following on the historical position of the church: "The word *ecclesia*, translated 'church,' was a common one to people of Jesus' day. Among the Greeks it meant the assembly of the citizens of a free city or state, called together by a herald blowing a

horn. Among the Hebrews it meant the congregation of Israel called together before the tabernacle in the wilderness by the blowing of a silver trumpeter.”¹¹ The emphasis on freedom of worship and assembly underscored the role of the local church.

Historically, churches composed of voluntary community members united together in fellowship and worship to praise the Lord and Savior. Trent alluded to Jesus being the foundation of any church:

Jesus it was who began a new kind of *ecclesia* or church. It was composed of those whom he had called apart and had made into a new kind of people. This group of people he termed “my church.” That adjective “my” gives Christian meaning to the church as an institution.¹²

This summary supported Griffith’s foundational remarks – that the church’s root must be Jesus Christ. The association delegates also knew a united group of Baptists could likewise assist churches from trouble, perhaps from past or future heresies similar to those experienced in the ancient church. The confederation may be best described as a consultive assembly, as noted in Griffith’s writing:

The Baptist Association, therefore, arrogates no higher title than that of an Advisory Council, consistent with which epithet it ought ever to act, when it acts at all; without intruding on the rights of independent congregational churches; or usurping authority over them.¹³

Robert Torbet expanded on the role of the first association: “The Association was regarded as both an advisory council in matters of local concern and an expression of the larger church through which the mind of Christ might become known. It was therefore

looked to for decision and guidance in matters both trivial and important.”¹⁴ Honoring and respecting the individual and authority of each congregation remained the most crucial part of the established churches. Torbet continued, “A reading of the minutes from year to year indicates that the various churches relied upon the Association for advice and even the settlement of disputes.”¹⁵

On respecting the individuality and independence of the local church, joining a “confederation” or the association was strictly optional. Griffith wrote, “Where Providence gives them their situation, convenient, may and ought, for their mutual strength, counsel, and other valuable advantages, by their voluntary and free consent, to enter into an agreement and confederation.”¹⁶ Careful analysis of his writing underlines the complete control of each local church. Joining the association was voluntary, and never to be forced upon congregations. However, a united Baptist front provided benefits and commonality, strengthening the leaders and members as one body in Christ.

Nonetheless, not everyone could join, the prospective churches needed to adhere to the basic foundations of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, underlined in the doctrine and practice of existing Baptists. Position statements and later agreed-upon confessions underscored such standards. H. Leon McBeth explained the core tenets:

First, the association served as a doctrinal monitor. In time, most of the associations adopted a confession of faith, and some made adherence a condition of affiliation. Churches that departed significantly from Baptist doctrines were to be dealt with by the association and excluded if they did not recant.

Second, the association advised on Baptist practices.

Third, associations served as clearing houses in personal matters. Churches seeking pastors and pastors seeking settlement often worked through the associations.

Fourth, the associations promoted benevolent work, primarily in three areas of Christian education, the struggle for religious liberty, and home missions.

Fifth, associations provided fellowship for lonely Baptists.

Sixth, the associations provided models for preaching. Preaching was always a major feature of association meetings, and churches put forward their best preachers.¹⁷

While the original association maintained just a few official statements, necessary future declarations, including an order of discipline, developed. Member churches were required to send delegates that represented the local church. The delegates maintained power and representation, signing off on crucial assembly decisions. Griffith elaborated:

We are of the opinion, that an Association of the delegates of associate churches have a very considerable power in their hands, respecting those churches in their confederation; for if the agreement of several distinct churches, in sound doctrine and regular practice, be the first motive, ground and foundation or basis of their confederation.¹⁸

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respective congregation. While minor anomalies could separate churches, the foundation was the theological doctrine of Christ and the overall Baptist position. As such, the association held power to remove churches from the federation if a church did not adhere to position statements agreed upon by the member delegates.¹⁹ Likewise, each congregation could leave the association freely if it so chose.

The confederation was essential in protecting its churches and members from “ungodliness.” Though a loaded term, the association feared the heathens of the day as well as individuals misusing the Scriptures, those often referred to as false prophets (Matthew 7:15). Griffith explained, “The delegates of associate churches may exclude and withdraw from defective and unsound or disorderly churches or persons.”²⁰ Comparing the idea to the early church councils, he continued:

The practice of after ages is found in chap. Xvi 4 (Acts). Consistent therewith, the practice of after ages is found to be; when, because they had no council, synod, or association to convene, of course they called a council in order to make head against any error or disorders, when in any particular church, such things grew too big for a particular church peaceably to determine, as the case about circumcision was at Antioch.²¹

The original Baptists knew well that even a minor fraction in a local church could destroy a

congregation. Therefore, having the ability and duty to step in and intervene in such situations laid the foundation to protect both the church and its members. The logic was quite simple; the church maintained complete autonomy, though if a severe or un-Biblical issue arose, the association had the duty to protect the congregation by relying on the Bible as the standard for any decision. Summing up the purpose of the association, Griffith concluded:

An Association of the delegates of confederate churches may doctrinally declare any person or part in the church, who are defective in principles or disorderly in practice, to be censurable, when the affair comes under their cognizance, and without exceeding the bounds of their power and duty to advise the church that such belong unto, how to deal with such, according to the rule of the gospel discipline; and also to strengthen such a church, and assist her, if need be, by sending able men of their own number to help the church in executing the power vested in her by the ordinance of Jesus Christ, and to stand by her, and to defend her against the insults of such offending persons or parties.²²

The association strongly supported the local church, adhering to the congregationalist view of local church autonomy. However, the delegates and member churches knew heresy and false teachings could affect any physical church body. Here, the association took a firm stance and vehemently agreed to defend member churches from such potential scenarios. Likewise, when a church needed help, whether by a pastor filling the pulpit or providing other resources or counsel, the association united to care for its

churches. Torbet wrote on the focused power of the association, “It should not be concluded, however, that the Philadelphia group had no defined powers.”²³ He added, “The author (Griffith) made it quite clear that the Association had considerable power over its member churches in cases of defection from generally accepted doctrine and practice. It was allowed that such power might manifest itself in the exclusion of such a church from the fellowship of the Association.”²⁴

While the original association was small in numbers at inception, it set a principle that did not go unnoticed, one that soon formed in the southern colonies too. James L. Clark wrote, “This essay (Griffith’s) began to exert a strong influence upon other associations in this country soon after its adoption by the Philadelphia Association. The Charleston Association when organized in 1751 at Charleston, South Carolina, at that time also concluded that Griffith’s essay should be inserted in their Book, as judging it most expressive of the Power and Duty of an Association.”²⁵

It remains important to note, the Philadelphia Baptist Association would be one of many found within the colonies. However, it started a standard and stood apart as the prime example for Baptist associations and fellowship. Interestingly, delegates from the Philadelphia Baptist Association later maintained a voice in political discourse when urging liberty from English rule, exemplifying their own standards and practices as the standards. Torbet wrote:

In 1757 it had a membership of twenty-five churches which were situated in the colonies of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Connecticut, New York, Virginia, and Maryland. The statistics on

membership were not recorded until 1762, when there were twenty-nine congregations with 4,018 members. The significance of the association cannot be overemphasized, for without violating Baptist church autonomy, it provided a source of guidance and unity at a critical period of organization in the denomination.²⁶

Perhaps not known to the region's Baptists of the day, their organization, meetings, and this essential essay compiled in 1749 laid the groundwork for modern-day associations and conventions and underscored local church autonomy. Likewise, it played a role in further discussions on religious freedom and liberty. Historians today still study the impact of the Great Awakening and religious freedom movements of the day in conjunction with the American Revolution. The original Baptists clearly played a role here.

Conclusion

A rather brief, simple essay composed in 1749 set the foundation of Baptists for future generations. While Baptists of the past and present are proud Congregationalists, most affirm the need for some form of counsel and agree that a united group of churches protects their congregations and members from outside controversies and heresies.

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Reformation set the original standard relying on the Scriptures alone and underlining that salvation is by faith alone. The Reformation paved the way for later councils and associations. Griffith's essay underscored that the individual church held power and laid its foundation on the Lord Jesus Christ. The Philadelphia Baptist Association started small yet provided a standard in church autonomy that influenced Baptists from their beginning until today. Their makeup and position on liberty also spread through the colonies, assisting in the formation of other associations and even playing a part in the American Revolution.

Their view was simple: the church has ultimate control, though the association existed to support the local church, provide help when and where it could, and protect its members from false ways and teachings. The latter is the most monumental part of the association. The Lord Himself promised false teachers existed, and Christians today know this remains the case. A united association of Bible-believing churches helped combat such false teachings and highlighted the importance of the body of Christ versus the idea of following one man, who, like any human being, was a fallible creature.

Baptists historically rejoice in their formation, focusing on church autonomy, yet rightly acknowledging the importance and usefulness of a united front of churches within an association. The position provides individuality yet also protection from heresies. Griffith's essay laid the foundation for such principles for generations to come.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 211.
- ² James L. Clark, *To Set them in Order: Some Influences of the Philadelphia Baptist Association Upon Baptists of America to 1814*, (Springfield: Particular Baptist Press, 2001), 7.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.
- ⁶ Thomas S. Kidd & Barry Hawkins, *Baptists in America: A History*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 2015.
- ⁷ McBeth, 223.
- ⁸ Robert R. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1950), 213.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ A. D. Gillette, *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, from A. D. 1707 to A.D. 1807: Being the First One Hundred Years of Its Existence*, (1749; reprint, London: Forgotten Books, 2018), 61.
- ¹¹ Robbie Trent, *The Faith We Share*, (Nashville: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1947), 86.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Clark, 133.
- ¹⁴ Torbet, 212.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 213.
- ¹⁶ Gillette, 61.
- ¹⁷ McBeth, 244-246.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ McBeth, 244-246.
- ²⁰ Gillette, 62.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Gillette, 63.
- ²³ Torbet, 213.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Clark, 128.
- ²⁶ Torbet, 214.