

Welsh Baptist Polity—II. The Association.

FOR three centuries, the Association has played an all important part in the life of the Baptist Denomination in Wales. It has been our one basic and ever active form of organisation, and has, throughout the above period, received the confidence and esteem of the Churches. When the Baptist Union of Wales was formed, it was set up practically as a Union of associations.

The Welsh Association met, for the first time, at Ilston, Nov. 6th and 7th, 1650. The year is suggestive. The trying days of Charles I were over and the more spacious times of the Commonwealth had arrived. The Church at Ilston had also been formed in 1649, and the whole of South Wales was alive with unorganised Baptists. All needed information and instruction as to Church life and doctrine. Amidst the ferment of ideas and the new sense of liberty, the people held firm hold upon a few fundamental Christian principles. The new wine called for new forms of religious activity. All this meant schooling, teaching, training. The traditions and superstitions of the past were gone. The priest with his rule and "authority" was done for. A new class of spiritual teachers and leaders was required. To meet these new demands, the Association appeared as if spontaneously, to unite and guide the young churches.

During the years 1650 and 1656, this new organisation met nine times, at Ilston, Carmarthen, Llanharan, Abergavenny (twice), Aberavon, Llantrisant, Hay, and Brecon. There are evidences of meetings up to 1660, but all records are lost. During the Restoration, 1660-1688, darkness again covered the land. The Association vanished, and dissenting church life became an underground or prison affair. With the coming of William and Mary in 1689, a brighter day dawned upon Wales. The Welsh Churches were invited to send representatives to the English Association Meetings held in London, September 3, 1689, and attended not only in 1689, but also in 1690 and 1691. An effort was made to form the Churches of the Principality into two associations, Eastern and Western, but nothing came of it. In 1689, the English Association was divided in two, the churches of Wales joining with the Western half, meeting as a rule at Bristol and Taunton.

In the year 1700 one Association was established for Wales, and, from that year up to date, its series of annual assemblies

have remained unbroken. By 1790, several new churches had been formed in North Wales, necessitating closer intercourse and more help. Consequently, the one Welsh body became three Associations, the Northern, the South Eastern and the South Western. Still all three continued in close touch with one another as witness their annual "Letters" or Reports, the timing of their annual assemblies, their preaching arrangements, their annual collections for weak churches and the recognition of pastors and preachers.

THE NORTHERN ASSOCIATION.

The Northern Association was soon subjected to stormy times. J. R. Jones of Ramoth, Merionethshire, a minister of some strength and influence, became imbued with Sandemanianism, and corresponded with MacLean and Robert Sandeman, of Scotland. Many of the Churches of North Wales were rent in twain, and the Northern Association lapsed in 1795. Three of the Churches became members of one of the Southern Associations. In about ten years time, the new section became divided still further and involved the Baptists of North Wales in bitter controversy with the Campbellites, or Disciples of Christ, as well as with the MacLeanites or Sandemanians. It is not an easy task to disentangle the doctrines in dispute. The first thing that strikes an ordinary Baptist is, that all three parties stood for and emphasised principles and doctrines that all were agreed upon. For instance, the older Baptists practised monthly communion while the newer sections stood out for a weekly celebration of the ordinance. No principle was involved. The Association as such came in for criticism by the newer Baptists and were accused of over-riding the churches and of being a kind of Romanish conclave that wielded some form of ecclesiastical authority in matters of doctrine. Further, Sandemanians and Campbellites were opposed to the stated ministry and all forms of priestliness. Rather than the terms "bishop" or "minister," they would call their leaders "elders." Again these sections condemned Sunday Schools. They argued that the Sabbath should be honoured as a day of rest and worship. To them, conducting school was a secular business and therefore unworthy of the holy day. Furthermore, was not the teaching of Welsh one of the chief occupations of the Sunday School and surely the teaching of a language must be a secular concern.

These family quarrels, which were void of real differences, and were largely based upon imaginary distinctions, engendered bitter feelings and created lasting feuds as usual. The Campbellites have practically ceased to be in North Wales, the two or three small companies now remaining being regarded and helped

as a mission by the Disciples, in England. The Scotch or Sandemanian Baptists, have also dwindled to at most, six or seven small congregations in North Wales, and these have always been efficiently and zealously led and served by a small number of excellent brethren of sterling quality and good standing, who were well-versed in Scripture and acceptable preachers. The old asperities have disappeared and the old "reasons" for separation are non-existent today. Weekly or monthly communion is equally acceptable to all sections. The Association, with its Committees and Assemblies, can no longer act as a bogey to anyone, being as it is, utterly void of any assumed authority and being nothing more than an obedient instrument of the freest of free churches. The Sunday School also receives the constant homage of all three Baptist sections to-day.

DIVISION AND WEAKNESS

A question occasionally asked is, why are the Baptists so numerically weak in North Wales as compared with the Welsh Presbyterians and Congregationalists, and with the Baptists of South Wales? Discussing North and South Wales, it should be remembered that the Counties of South Wales contain four times the population of North Wales, and that the industrial revolution crowded the coal regions of the South just in time to meet the great religious awakening of the so-called Methodist revival. North Wales was sparsely populated and in addition to that, Baptists were not in evidence there until nearly the end of the eighteenth century. Even then, when our belated Denomination entered upon its mission and prospects were promising, the Churches were paralysed by the Sandemanian controversy. Bitter argumentation usurped the place of evangelisation and, instead of expansion and church growth, young causes were withering under the deadly blight. When Thomas Charles of Bala, the eminent Presbyterian minister, pioneered and established Sunday Schools throughout the length and breadth of the land, and each school, within a few years grew into a thriving Church, Baptist unity was broken, zeal was quenched, new causes were dying and preachers missed the divine unction from their pulpit ministrations. Even Christmas Evans complained at one time that the spirit of God had forsaken him. In all this cause and effect are patent enough.

RESUSCITATION.

The Northern Association was resuscitated in 1802, in Anglesey. For upwards of forty years, the Churches of the six counties together with those of Liverpool and Manchester constituted one Association, which had three annual meetings, one

being the Chief Assembly the other two being auxiliary, or County meetings. These were always held within a few days of each other so that the "association preachers" could visit all three and proceed straight away from one to another. About 1844 the one body became two Associations, Anglesey and Carnarvonshire combining. Inasmuch as it was more convenient to go by boat to the meetings in Anglesey and Carnarvon than by road to Merioneth and Denbighshire, the Churches of Liverpool and Manchester joined the North Western Association. Soon after this, with the coming of better travelling facilities, the erstwhile separate branches of the Northern Association became three independent Associations and, as such, can look forward to the celebration of their centenary. Still, all three had but one "Association Letter," from 1791 up to 1895, except the years 1847, 1848, during each of which two "Letters" were issued.

THE SOUTH-EASTERN ASSOCIATION.

This body covered the populous valleys of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire with their thriving coal and iron industries, and saw a busy and successful time in meeting the demands of old and new churches. In 1831, after forty years of happy co-operation the Monmouthshire Association hived off, and went upon its own. In 1857 and 1858, a further sub-division took place when the Monmouthshire English Association was formed. In 1833, Glamorganshire started keeping house for itself and its own Association. On attaining to its Jubilee in 1883 this was also divided into two bodies, known as the East Glamorgan and West Glamorgan Welsh Associations. A most interesting function was witnessed in 1933, when, at the end of another half century, these Associations held their joint-assembly at Blackmill, and celebrated in love-feasts of fellowship, preaching and thanksgiving, their rich experience of God's grace and mercy, during all these years.

In the meantime, however, the Glamorgan English Association had been formed in 1860, and served the churches well for fifty-three years. In 1913, however, following the county tradition, the East and West Glamorgan English entered upon their separate existence, the latter taking in the English Churches of Carmarthenshire and being known for a while as the West Wales English Association. In 1907, the Glamorgan English Close Communion Association came into being and, after a short career, passed away in 1912. In 1865, the churches of Breconshire stood apart and established an association for themselves, leaving the original South Eastern Association with nothing but the Baptists of Radnor and Montgomery which became known as "The Old Association". This meant that the one body formed in 1791, had been subdivided into eight associations.

THE SOUTH-WESTERN ASSOCIATION

This Association consisted of the Churches of the Counties of Pembroke, Carmarthen and Cardigan, and in 1832 separated into three County Associations. In 1841, however, those of Carmarthen and Cardigan were re-united and to this day, form the "Carmarthen and Cardigan Association." Pembrokeshire, with its distinct Welsh and English regions, remains united as of yore, and has continued, for well over a hundred years, to print its Welsh and English Annual Reports, but for one exception. The "Letter" or Report for 1897 never saw the light of day, and thereon hangs an interesting tale.

THE NORTH WALES ENGLISH BAPTIST UNION

Reverting again to North Wales, we find that the English Churches there were at first members of the Welsh Association but in 1879, the N.W.E.B. Union was founded, and for many years issued its own Reports. About the year 1912 this body became affiliated with the Lancashire and Cheshire Association, and, though retaining its identity, is really a branch of the larger organisation. The one Association of 1650-1656, and 1700-1790, or the three Associations of 1790-1830 now function as fourteen separate entities.

THE BAPTIST UNION OF WALES

With one and even with three associations the Baptists of the Principality had been able to take concerted action. With a multiplicity of such disconnected organisations things were different. To meet the new situation the Baptist Union of Wales and Monmouthshire was established at Llanwenarth, in 1866. The first Annual Meeting was held in the following year at Carmarthen. By this time the association had become strong and influential, enjoying the full confidence of the Churches. Some feared that the coming of the new Union meant the creation of a kind of authority that sought to control the life of both Churches and associations. Consequently, it was at first met with suspicion and a few associations stood aloof. By 1878, and the Annual Meeting of that year, held at Aberystwyth, all had joined in.

In 1861, a movement was initiated to commemorate the massacre of the Huguenots in France in 1572, and the "Ejection of the two thousand" on St. Bartholomew's Day in 1662 in Britain. Funds were collected; a College was established at Llangollen and the Baptist Building Fund was formed. At first, the target was £2,000. By the end of 1862, this was raised to £10,000. The year 1867 saw the promises totalling £12,000. The total loans granted to the churches, free of interest, by 1899,

amounted to £44,376. The leader on this occasion was Mr. Llewellyn Jenkins, a Cardiff printer, son of Dr. John Jenkins, Hengoed, and brother of John Jenkins, a Missionary in Brittany.

The Building Fund thus became the nucleus of the new Union. In 1871, the Minister's Provident Society was organised. In 1879 came the Temperance Society; in 1887, the Literature Society. In 1888, the Assurance Trust and the Sunday School Union. Later, at Rhyl, in 1895, the Home Mission was formed, under the presidency of Mr. Alfred Thomas, M.P., later known as Lord Pontypridd. All these Funds, Societies or Trusts, held their Annual Meetings during the same week and clustered around the Union. All were "independent" and yet all represented the same Churches. The Union Committee co-ordinated the miscellaneous hosts, during Union week, so that they, being one and many at the same time, would not clash. Each, however, managed its own affairs and published its own reports and papers.

In 1899, an important step forward was taken, when, as far as possible all branches were combined, and made the annual meetings of the Union Assembly their formal annual meeting. Every branch committee, therefore, submitted its Minutes and Accounts to the Council of the Union, which, therefore, became the chief administrative medium for all, and the means of presenting all reports to the Assembly. The year 1900 therefore became a landmark in the history of the Union.

A FULL TIME SECRETARY AND CHURCH HOUSE.

This, however, called for another change. So far, the Union had been served by part-time officers, both lay and ministerial. The work grew and duties became more exacting. Space for stores and office amenities were called for. After some correspondence in *Seren Cymru*, our Welsh Baptist Weekly, and discussions in conference and council negotiations were opened with the B.M.S., a practical scheme was submitted to the Union and adopted. Subsequently, the Rev. Edwyn Edmunds, the then part-time secretary of the Union, was appointed as full-time secretary. According to the new arrangement, Mr. Edmunds became the agent of the B.M.S. in Wales, gave half his time to its work and received one half of his salary from that source. In order to meet the other half, the various Funds and Societies mentioned pooled their officers' honoraria and installed the new officer as their Secretary. Still the work grew. The B.M.S. desired a full-time agent for Wales and the Welsh Union welcomed the opportunity to receive the whole of its secretary's time. The Rev. Thomas Lewis of the Congo, a *persona grata* to all the Baptists of Wales, was appointed as the first full-time representative of the B.M.S. in the Principality, and the Rev. E.

Edmunds, loved by all, became more free to devote his whole time to the demands of the Union, and to visit the churches, where he was always sure of a hearty welcome.

The new arrangement necessitated other needs. A Church House and Offices were called for. In due time Ilston House was built, in a convenient spot in Swansea, with a serviceable suite of rooms, such as a Book-room, Council Chambers, Offices, Committee rooms, Stores and Dwelling house for the Secretary and his family.

It should have been stated that several other branches have been added to the work of the Union since the re-formation of its Constitution in 1899. The "Historical Association" was founded in 1901 and is rendering valuable service, but is formally apart from the Union. Likewise a Peace or Pacifist Society is also in operation, meeting during Union week with the approval of the Union, although maintaining its separate and independent existence. Recently also a Women's Branch has been formally added to the work of the Union, and is promising to render a good account of itself. On the other hand, the Sustentation Fund, started under the auspices of the Union continues as an important part of the business of the larger body. In 1920, or thereabouts, a sum of £50,000 was collected, under the leadership of Principal W. Edwards, Cardiff, as Treasurer, and the Rev. W. A. Williams, Pontypridd, as secretary, and invested. In addition to the proceeds from these investments, the Churches of Wales are at present contributing upwards of £2,500 per annum towards the maintenance of the weaker churches.

THE COLLEGES

The Baptists of Wales have been well-served by a number of Colleges, situate in various parts of the country. The school at Trosnant, Pontypool, from 1732-1770 turned out some eminent men, apart from those that had proceeded thence for a period at Bristol College. From 1770 to 1807 our Churches depended upon the Academies of England where many Welsh ministers were trained. During the years 1807-1837, the Rev. Micah Thomas conducted the Abergavenny Academy. This was removed to Pontypool in 1837 and thence to Cardiff. West South Wales established its College in 1839, at Haverfordwest and North Wales another in 1862 at Llangollen. With the coming of the University Colleges, all three Baptist institutions sent some of their students to Cardiff, Aberystwyth and Bangor and ultimately betook themselves bodily to these new seats of learning. Pontypool College removed to Cardiff, Haverfordwest College to Aberystwyth and Llangollen College to Bangor.

The Churches came to believe that they could, with advantage,

reduce the number of the schools of the prophets. In 1897, plebiscites were taken. The first decided that two such institutions should suffice for Wales. The second located these at Cardiff and Bangor. The Haverfordwest—Aberystwyth College therefore passed away, in 1898, and was formerly merged in the older Abergavenny-Pontypool-Cardiff College. For many years the Welsh Colleges prepared some of their students for the examinations of London University, and quite a number took the degree of B.A. With the coming of the University of Wales with its four constituent Colleges, many of our young men were prepared for Welsh degrees. Some proceeding to the M.A. degree, while quite a good number have undertaken the six years course of study, taking the post-graduate course of B.D. as well. Needless to say, all this has had its effect upon our ministerial and church life. It would be invidious to mention the names of distinguished professors and successful students, let it therefore suffice us to say that, among both sections were found men of learning and culture, who served our churches worthily and well, and whose names and memory remain with us as a sweet-smelling savour and as a lasting inspiration to our people.

WELSHMEN IN ENGLISH PULPITS AND IN FOREIGN LANDS.

For from a hundred and fifty to two hundred years, Wales has given of its best to the Baptist Churches of England. It would be easy to cite eminent names of Welshmen, and of late, of students of our Welsh Colleges, who have occupied positions of trust and responsibility in English pulpits and Colleges, but here again we must avoid the odium of selecting names and of making comparisons. Wales is proud of the attainments and services of these men, nevertheless we cannot be unmindful of the loss to our Churches implied in their transference to England. It is true that many of our young men have proceeded to English Baptist Colleges for their Education and training, but it is also equally true that they never return to minister in our Welsh pulpits afterwards. On both transaction the credit is on the eastern and the debit on the western side of Offa's Dyke. Of missionaries that have gone further afield to China with Timothy Richards, to Africa with Thomas Lewis, and to India with W. R. James, Daniel Jones, George Hughes and Dr. George Howells, we could cite a long list whose names cause our hearts to rejoice and quicken our gratitude to God.

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