

Circular Letter of the Berkshire Association, 1707.

THE Association was formed on 8 October, 1652, and soon included Abingdon, Faringdon, Henley, Longworth, Reading, Wantage; besides Oxford, Pyrton (opposite Wallingford), Tetsworth, Watlington and Wormsley; Haddenham in Bucks; Hemel Hempstead in Herts; Kingston in Surrey. It was staunchly Calvinistic. The meetings were suspended when the Presbyterians regained power in 1659, and although much is known of the separate places in 1669 and 1672, no further corporate action is known till 1678. Then from the church books of Petty France, quoted by Ivimey, we learn that meeting were held for six years at Abingdon, London, Hemel Hempstead, St. Albans, Abingdon, Hemel Hempstead, London. Possibly the removal of Henry Forty from London to Abingdon promoted this revival, and the inclusion of London. The renewed persecution of 1684 caused a second suspension. At the Assembly of 1691 another grouping was adopted: Abingdon, Faringdon, Longworth, Reading, Wantage; with Oxford and Finstock (near Witney); Cirencester and Maizey Hampton. But trouble sprang up, owing partly to the arrival of Mark Key, a General Baptist from Whites Alley, first at Reading. The Calvinists had caused trouble in many General Baptist Churches, now for once it was the opposite. Though in the end Mark Key was won over to Calvinism and returned to London in 1702 to aid Richard Adams (who had had the same experience) at Devonshire Square, yet the Coate church entered in January 1705-6 that brother Fowllett promised to forbear beginning with any about the principle of Universal Redemption, disallowed of by this church. Next year things had so far calmed down that a meeting was called at Abingdon to reorganize. An elaborate code of rules was drawn up, and signed on behalf of Abingdon, Coate, Faringdon, Newbury, Wantage and Witney; Reading came in next year. This letter was then evidently dispatched to each church, and is the earliest

which survives in this district, though the custom of sending such letters was quite half a century old.

The letter was transcribed with much other valuable material from the church records at Coate and Longworth, by Joseph Stennett the third, who went there as pastor in 1743. About 1747 he lent his copy to Thomas Crosby, who copied it anew into Stinton's Repository. About 1860 this in its turn was copied for George Gould, and a few years ago this was copied afresh and lent to the Berkshire Association. Most of the material was published in "Gleanings from Forgotten Fields," by the Rev. Henry R. Salt; this nearly completes the gleanings. Stennett's copy is now part of the Angus collection; Gould's copy has descended to his son, our President. Both are now at Regent's Park. The paging in the latter copy is marked here.

The Association of Church Messengers to ye Baptized Church of Christ meeting at Coate and Longworth wisheth ye abundant Increase of all grace gifts and Comforts through ye knowledge of God and our glorious Saviour Jesus Christ.

Holy and beloved Brethren we being by ye direction of ye several Churches unto which we belong Ingaged in an Association for ye Advancing of ye honour & Interest of our Dear Lord Jesus, and promoting the peace Comfort & Edification of his Mystically members doe easily perswade ourselves that you will favour & Incourage our honest and sincere endeavours by your kindly accepting of and Conscientiously adhering to ye following exhortations which we hope are agreeable to ye word of truth and necessary (as we conceive) in order to the above mentioned ends of our present meeting, for though we cannot suppose you ignorant of the duties exhorted to, or that upon mature consideration you can judge yorselves unconcerned therein, Yet forasmuch as this a day wherein Iniquity doth wofully abound and ye love of many Godly wax cold And while the Bridegroom tarrieth we fear that many of ye wise [page 172] are too much like ye foolish Virgins Indulging their slumber whilst

ye other are sleeping, We have therefore thought ourselves concerned to write unto you to advise you to take heed to yorselves that ye may stand fast & pserve in ye faith & carefully avoid those snares and seductions of which you are in danger in this evill day. And we are desirous to stir up your pure minds by putting you in Remembrance that it greatly concerns you faithfully & zealously to improve ye present means and Liberty which our Bountiful Father hath been pleased to afford us that you may accomplish the work of your God whilst it is day before ye night come upon you when there is no working, And for this purpose it is highly requisite that your labour to maintain the savour of Religion upon yor own spirits and that you press after an experimentall acquaintance with ye power of those truths which you have Recd and do profess. And it will become you to manifest your zeal for the Kingly authority of our Lord Jesus by your care and endeavour to preserve the order of his house and ye purity of his Worship according to ye rules prescribed in his holy word and by your diligence in exercising yourselves in all the publick and private duties of Religion which he hath commanded his people to perform, but beware of formality that desert in Religion on ye account of which the most specious performances are an abomination to the Lord. But let the glory of God and the enjoyment of communion with himself be sincerely pursued as the ends of all your devotion.

And we further exhort you to take care that ye Beauty of holyness may adorn your Conversation with men, that you may be the salt of ye earth and ye Light of the world, that your words & actions may hold forth the Word of Life, that you may not cast a stumbling block before ye feet of any, but that by your good Conversations you may Induce them to glorifie God in the day of their [page 173] visitation, And we also entreate you that you degrade not your holy profession

nor expose the souls of your Families by neglecting to keep up ye worship of God in your houses, but that you will exercise a religious discipline in them.

We desire that you would be unweariedly dilligent to Train up your Children and others under your Charge in ye Nurture and admonition of the Lord that so by the blessing of God on your faithful endeavours you may propagate the pure Religion in ye succeeding generations that instead of the Fathers there may be ye Children whom God will bless. and we beseech you in ye Bowels of Christ that you put on Charity and exercise ye same continually one towards another, bear ye one anothers burdens and forbear each other in Love, endeavouring as much as in you lieth to keep ye Unity of the Spirit in ye Bond of peace, let a due respect to ye honour of your profession and ye welfare of your fellow Christians induce you to a faithful care for each other as becometh members of ye same body, let an holy emulation prompt you to endeavour to excell in vertue. And let each one strive to be ye most usefull Member in ye Body of Christ. And for ye more Commodious and Effectual Discharge of your duties of Brotherly kindness we conceive it will be necessary that you visit each other as oft as conveniently you can, that so being acquainted with each others circumstances you may in Love administer as the case may require. And that these your visitations may be for ye better and not for ye worse you have need to take heed that your opportunities be not mispent in vain and unprofitable Discourses but let your speech be seasoned with grace and your words such as may be good for ye use of edifying, and as 'tis ye duty of each member to visit the rest so we judge that the Church (which consists of all the members) is more especially concerned in this matter, and [page 174] therefore ought frequently to enquire in ye Circumstances of every Individual, and if it be too great a task for your

Minister to visit all the members we conceive it will be requisite that some meet persons be appointed to assist him therein. Moreover we earnestly beseech you to know them who labour among you in ye service of ye Ministry and to love and esteem them for their works sake; Consider the importance and difficulty of their service, and as you tender ye glory of God and ye good of souls help them continually by your prayers. And we desire you will be careful that you may not grieve their spirits nor discourage them in their work by your unprofitableness under their Ministry but let your Fruitfulness appear unto them and to all men that they may be Comforted and Your heavenly Father Glorified. learn to prize and pity the souls of others & Labour to contribute to the success of the Ministry on them by your Conscientious performance of the Duties above mentioned. Also we Reco^mend to your practise that Indispensible duty of praying for those Churches with which you are engaged In this Association and for ye whole Militant Church of Christ and ye success of ye Gospel all the world over. Oh pray for ye pouring down of that promised spirit by whom alone we may expect the Reviving of the lost power of Religion in ye hearts & lives of ye professors thereof, and ye accomplishment of that work of Conversion on sinners which hath been of late so much at a stand, and further to excite and direct you in this work wee hereby transfer unto you the accounts which have been brought unto us of the state of those Churches which have been represented by their Messengers in this Association. Through the great goodness of our God most of ye members are kept stedfast in that faith of which they have made a profession and seem well satisfied to walk in those ways of [page 175] God unto which they have devoted themselves. and we Rejoice to hear the same of you.