

Associational Meeting Report September 28th

Grace, and peace to you in the name of our Triune God. Our gracious Father has mercifully drawn us together in the Son, by the power of the Spirit for the glory of his name and united us as churches through our common confession of faith. Therefore, it is our intention to hold communion together, and to display this communion as we testify of our common confession of faith.

It is with great joy in the Lord that we send this report of our third association discussion meeting. On September 28th, Trinity Grace Church in Ramsbottom hosted 21 men from 12 different churches to discuss the forming of a national association of confessional Baptist churches. In God's providence 20 different churches, from all over the UK, have been represented at one of our meetings. There is a growing interest and desire for churches to unite around the 2nd London Baptist Confession of Faith and to live out this confession to the glory of God and the good of all our churches. While our first two meetings focused on lectures concerning the history, biblical nature, and confessional practice of associationalism, this past meeting sought to demonstrate an associational spirit by engaging in deliberate discussions of various topics. The discussions expressed the great zeal and convictions of these men, debating difficult issues, while at the same time demonstrating charity and patience towards one another, giving us great hope for a future association. We give thanks to God for the peace and unity we enjoyed once again as we were united according to the mind of Christ declared in his word. We discussed 9 different topics which can be summarised under three headings: the nature of confessionalism, the nature of associationalism, and finally the practice of associationalism.

Our first discussion focused on the nature of confessionalism. It was the stated conviction of our churches to have an association which adopts and embraces the 2LCF as the basis of our unity. While the scriptures are our primary rule and standard of truth, as the "only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith and obedience", we desire to adopt the 2LCF as a subordinate standard and best summary of the teaching of scripture. However, for the confession to have meaning in an association and to keep us from falling into error, we must be settled on what it means to subscribe to it. In this regard, we discussed full subscription as perhaps the best way to subscribe, which "takes at face value the language of the confession of faith" and positively believes "that we are embracing every doctrine of the Confession as true, founded upon the Word of God".¹ Certainly, there are still issues that need to be discussed before establishing a level of subscription for a future association, and churches had several reservations of the wording of particular doctrines in the confession, which require further consideration. Overall, there seemed to be a consensus that full subscription was the best way to proceed. Our churches desire to embrace and confess the entirety of the confession of faith because we believe it is biblical – we want to be an association of confessional Baptist churches in the UK.

Equally important to our confessional subscription is our active utility of the confession in the life of our churches. Our confessional subscription must not be just a box we tick, or

¹ Morton, Smith. *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*. Also consider Dr. Jim Renihan's statement on Full Subscription.

document signed in our church deed that is then left on the shelf; rather the confession of faith is to be an authoritative standard and guide for our faith and practice, and ought to influence the life of our churches. Moreover, if we associate together around our confession of faith, then we must not allow extra-confessional issues to divide us. Our confession of faith was written as a uniting document, intended not only to exclude others who are outside the bounds of the confession, but to unite us together with those of the same faith, and at points it is intentionally inclusive to ensure unity with those who differ. We want to uphold our confession of faith and maintain orthodoxy within our churches, while at the same time expressing a warm catholicity that reflects the oneness of the body of Christ, for the sake of the gospel. May the Lord enable a future association to uphold a robust confessionalism, guided by our theology in all we do, and at the same time a gracious spirit that seeks unity in the gospel.

Our second discussion focused on the nature of associationalism, and particularly a national association of churches. We recognise that there are other national entities and partnerships that are engaged in the work of the gospel, as well as other regional associations of churches throughout the UK. However, in most parts of the country there are very few confessional churches, so that many do not have an opportunity to associate on a regional level. This is one reason why we believe that, according to the providence of God, we ought to associate on a national level, which should enable a good number of churches to hold communion together on a confessional basis. Furthermore, we believe that a national association ought not to be at odds with, or in competition to, other regional fellowships, but we hope they will be mutually beneficial. We also believe that a national association will enable us to give a visible expression of our unity in the gospel and to testify of our common confession of faith throughout the UK. In addition, a national association could facilitate many things that are difficult regionally, such as theological and missionary training, missions (home and abroad), and publications of resources. In fact, the 2LCF was signed by a national association of churches in 1689 who assembled for some of these purposes. Undoubtedly, a national association brings with it many challenges, but if our churches are committed to our confession of faith and to one another, then we believe it will be for the good of all our churches and the glory of God among us. Thus, each church, no matter how large or how small, or how isolated geographically, is enabled to use their gifts and graces for the good of the association, and likewise to be recipients of the same; for this to take place our churches must actively and joyfully hold communion together according to the mind of Christ.

The third and final discussion focused on the practical outworking of associationalism. This dealt with the power, purpose, and privileges of an association, as well as the mutual commitment and care required of the churches. Here we discussed the outworking of 26:15: our association should uphold the independency of the churches, at the same time as an intentional interdependency. Since we believe that Christ is at work through the churches, and that our churches ought to hold communion together according to his mind and Spirit, then we ought to expect a beneficial and fruitful outworking of our confessional principles. The authority of the association lies in the union of the churches and is limited in scope. Four areas of authority were discussed: conscientious commendation, exclusion, advice, and business. What a privilege it is for churches to receive commendation from one another, and to commend ministers for the sake

of the gospel. The power of exclusion of churches who are out of bounds in doctrine or practice, is likewise not only to uphold our confessionalism, but to help keep us all accountable to the faith we profess. When difficulties of doctrine or administration do arise in the life of our churches, we also ought humbly to seek advice from the association for the sake of each of our members, and the glory of Christ. Contrary to the spirit of our day, which prizes individualism and isolation, we believe that interdependency and accountability are necessary for the wellbeing of our churches. In this way, we desire an association that is committed to the peace, increase of love and mutual edification of each one of our churches, and who humbly, lovingly, and wisely give and receive advice, without enacting any church-power. We also believe that one of the great purposes of an association is to uphold our confession of faith against all heresy and error, and to help our churches stand against the ungodliness of the age. As we seek to be associational in these ways, we desire to facilitate the mission of the churches in the work of evangelism, church planting & the theological training of ministers; we are also committed to sharing our resources together, especially in sending elders and gifted brothers to preach in sister churches.

At the close of the meeting, we proposed that the churches sign a declaration of their established intent to continue to pursue the forming of a national formal association of churches. It states, that “we will endeavour, with all love and sincerity, as far as we are able, to commit ourselves to one another in the establishment of a national association that fully subscribes to the 2nd London Baptist Confession of Faith.” We also proposed to hold our next meeting in March 2022, at Christ Church Loughborough. May the Lord continue to grant to us the grace and wisdom necessary to hold communion together and until we gather again to uphold one another in prayer for glory of God. Therefore, we close with a portion of the narrative given from the General Assembly of 1692, “Considering the near Relation we stand in one another, as children of one Father, members of one body, heirs of one Kingdom, our souls, are engaged to pray for you as for ourselves, that you may increase in number, and in all graces in the Church militant, as a preparative for the church triumphant.”

*Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.
Amen.” (Hebrews 13:20-21)*

Soli Deo Gloria.

Trinity Grace Church, Ramsbottom.

October 18th, 2021.