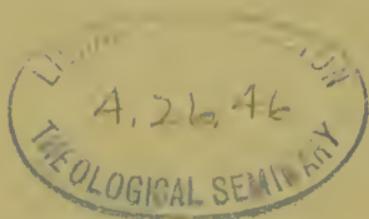


Circular Letter  
from the Ministers and  
Messengers of the  
several Baptist Churches  
of the Northamptonshire  
Association, 1806

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BX6278

N8A4

Northamptonshire (England)  
Baptist Association

*The assistance that people should render to their  
ministers in promoting the interest of Christ.*

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73  
THE  
CIRCULAR LETTER

FROM THE  
MINISTERS AND MESSENGERS  
OF THE SEVERAL  
BAPTIST CHURCHES

OF THE  
NORTHAMPTONSHIRE ASSOCIATION,

*Assembled at Leicester May 27, 28, 29, 1806.*

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 future judgment; the eternal happiness of the righteous; and everlasting misery of such as die impenitent; with the congregational order of the churches, inviolably:

*To the several Churches they represent, or from which they have received Letters:*

Meeting at *Lofcoe*, and *Swanwick*, Derbyshire; *Sutton-Ashfield*, and *Nottingham*, Nottinghamshire; *Burton-upon-Trent*, Staffordshire; *Sheepshead*, *Leicester*, *Sutton-in-the-Elms*, *Arnsby*, and *Foxton*, Leicestershire; *Oakham*, Rutland; *Spalding*, Lincolnshire; *Gretton*, *Clipstone*, *Guilsborough*, *Braunston*, *Walgrave*, *Kettering*, *Moulton*, *Road*, *Bugbrook*, and *Northampton*, Northamptonshire; *Olney* and *Ivinghoe*, Buckinghamshire; *Dunstable* and *Luton*, Bedfordshire; and *St. Albans*, Hertfordshire.

Grace be to you, and peace from God our Father, and from  
Jesus Christ our Lord!

DEAR BRETHREN,

THE desires expressed in most of your letters, that we might enjoy a happy interview, have been graciously granted. We do not remember an association which, upon the whole, was more pleasant, and we trust more profitable. It is true that our numbers have been considerably diminished in the last year by death. It is also true that the whole denomination, and we may say the church of Christ in general, has sustained a loss in the death of one of its most eminent ministers.\* It is however a consolation that our brethren who have

\* MR. ABRAHAM BOOTH, pastor of the church in Little Prescott-street, London; a man who for personal godliness, integrity, benevolence, and prudence, had but few equals.

been removed have finished their course with honour, and in some instances with joy. And while God hath diminished us on one hand he hath increased us on the other : several of the churches have had large additions ; and two new ones have been raised, and provided with pastors, both which, on application, have been received into this association. Upon the whole, we may say of this meeting, as is said of another, *Having seen the brethren, we thanked God, and took courage.*

The subject to which we on this occasion would call your attention is *the assistance which you may afford us in promoting the interest of Christ.*

The ministry to which God by your election hath called us forms a distinguished part of the gospel dispensation. Divine instruction was communicated under the old testament, and an order of men appointed of God for the purpose : but their work can scarcely be denominated *preaching*. They foretold the good news : but it is for us to proclaim it. The poor having the gospel preached to them is alleged in proof that the Messiah was come, and that they were not to look for another.

The very existence of christian churches is in subserviency to the preaching of the gospel ; or they would not have been described as “ golden candlesticks,” the use of which is to impart light to those around them. We speak not thus, brethren, to magnify ourselves. There is an important difference between christian ministers and the christian ministry. The former we are ready to acknowledge, exist for your sakes. “ Whether Paul, Apollos, or Cephas—all are yours :” but the latter, as being the chosen mean of extending the Redeemer’s kingdom, is that for which both we and you exist. “ Ye are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.”

These considerations will enable us to account for the joy which the apostle expressed in “ Christ’s being preached,” even though it were from “ envy ;” and may teach us to rejoice in the same thing though it be in the most corrupt communities, or even from the most suspicious motives. But though God may cause his truth to triumph wherever, and by whomsoever it is taught ; yet it should be our concern to publish it willingly and to the best advantage.

The primitive churches were not mere assemblies of men who agreed to meet together once or twice a week, and to subscribe for the support of an accomplished man who should on those occasions deliver lectures on religion. They were men gathered out of the world by the preaching of the cross, and formed into society for the promotion of Christ’s kingdom, in their own souls, and in the world around them. It was not the

concern of the ministers or elders only: the body of the people were interested in all that was done, and according to their several abilities and stations took part in it.—Neither were they assemblies of heady, high-minded, contentious people, meeting together to argue on points of doctrine or discipline, and converting the worship of God into scenes of strife. They spake the truth; but it was in love: they observed discipline; but, like an army of chosen men, it was that they might attack the kingdom of Satan to greater advantage.

Happy were it for our churches if we could come to a closer imitation of this model. God has graciously heard our prayers, and succeeded the labours of our brethren in a distant country, and some of the churches in this land, and in our own immediate connexion, have experienced some happy revivals: but this instead of rendering us negligent of further means, should furnish us with encouragement to press forward.

We trust it is our sincere desire as ministers to be more intent upon our work: but allow us to ask for your ASSISTANCE. Nehemiah, zealous as he was, could not have built the wall if the people had not had a mind to work. Nor could Ezra have reformed the abuses among the people if nobody had stood with him. But in his case the elders, when convinced of the necessity of the measure, offered themselves willingly to assist him. “Arise, said they, for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage and do it.” Such is the assistance, brethren, which we solicit at your hands.

We might enumerate the different ways in which your assistance in promoting the interest of Christ is needed. We might ask for your prayers, your early attendance, your counsels, your contributions, and your examples: but what we have to offer will arise from a review of the different branches of our own labours.

In the discharge of our work we have to do with four descriptions of people, and in dealing with each we stand in need of your assistance: namely, serious and humble christians—disorderly walkers—persons under concern about salvation—and persons manifestly unconverted.

First: It may be supposed that in every church of Christ there will be a considerable proportion of *serious and humble christians*. Our work in respect of them is to feed them with the wholesome doctrine of the word, and to teach them the mind of Christ in all things. The assistance which we ask of you, brethren, in this part of our ministry is, that you would not only pray for us, but be free to impart to us the state of

your minds, and whether our labours be edifying to you, or not. It is not so much by a systematical statement and defence of christian doctrines that believers are edified, as by those doctrines being applied to their respective cases. This is the way in which they are ordinarily introduced in the scriptures, and in which they become "words in due season." But we cannot well preach to the cases of people unless we know them.—Add to this: The *interest* which you discover in the things of God has a more than ordinary influence on our minds in the delivery of them. You cannot conceive the difference between addressing a people full of tender and affectionate attention, whose souls appear in their eyes, and answer, as it were, to the word of God; and preaching to those who are either half asleep, or their thoughts manifestly occupied by other things. By looking at the one our hearts have expanded like the flowers before the morning sun: thoughts have occurred, and sensations been kindled, which the labours of the study could never have furnished. But by observing the other our spirits are contracted like the flowers by the damps of the evening; and thoughts which were interesting when alone have seemed to die as they proceeded from our lips.

It will tend not a little to increase your interest in hearing if you exercise yourselves on other occasions to reading and reflexion. If you attend to the things of God only or chiefly while hearing us, we shall preach to you under great disadvantage. The apostle complained of many things being hard to be uttered, owing to the Hebrews being dull of hearing; and that for the time when they ought to have been teachers, they had need that one should teach them again which were the first principles of the oracles of God. Thinking hearers give a facility to preaching, even upon the most difficult subjects; while those whose minds are seldom occupied at other times can scarcely understand the most easy and familiar truths.

Secondly: In every church we must expect a greater or less proportion of *disorderly walkers*. Our work in respect of them is to warn, admonish, and if possible to reclaim them; or if that cannot be, to separate them, lest the little leaven should leaven the whole lump. But in these cases more than in many others we stand in need of your assistance. It is not ministers only, but all "who are spiritual," that the apostle addresses on this subject; and spiritual characters may always expect employment in restoring others in the spirit of meekness. It is of great importance to the well-being of a church that men are not wanting who will watch over one another in love, observe and counteract the first symptoms of declension, heal

differences at an early period, and nip disturbances in the bud. By such means there will be but few things of a disagreeable nature which will require either the censures of the church, or the interference of the pastor.

There will be instances, however, in which both the pastor and the church must interfere; and here it is of the utmost consequence that they each preserve a right spirit, and act in concert. There are two errors in particular into which individuals have frequently fallen in these matters. One is, a harsh and unfeeling conduct towards the offender, tending only to provoke his resentment, or to drive him to despair: the other is that of siding with him, apologizing for him, and carrying it so familiarly towards him in private as to induce him to think others who reprove him his enemies. Beware, brethren, of both these extremes, which, instead of assisting us in our work, is doing the utmost to counteract us. We may almost as well give over discipline as not to act in concert. It was on this principle that the apostle enjoined it on the Corinthians not to keep company if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one, *no not to eat*.

Your assistance is particularly necessary to resist and overcome those unlovely *partialities* which are too often found in individuals towards their relations, or favourites. We have seen and heard of disorderly walkers whose connexions in a church have been so extensive that when they should have been censured or admonished, either a strong opposition was raised in their favour, or at least a considerable number have chosen to stand neuter, and so to leave the officers of the church to act in a manner alone. It is glorious to see a people in such cases acting the part of Levi, who “did not acknowledge his brethren, nor know his own children; but observed God’s word, and kept his covenant!”

It is often extremely difficult for a pastor to go through with such matters without injury to his character and ministry. He being by his office obliged to take the lead, becomes the principal object of resentment; and every idle story is raked up by the party and his adherents which may wound his reputation, and impute his conduct to suspicious motives. If in such circumstances his brethren stand by him, he will disregard the slander of his enemies: but if they be indifferent, it will be death to him. Should such a conduct issue in his removal, it is no more than might be expected.

Thirdly: In every church of Christ it may be expected there will be some persons *inquiring after the way of salvation:*

This may be the case much more at some periods than at others; but we may presume from the promise of God to be with his servants, that the word of truth shall not be any length of time without effect. Our work in this case is to cherish conviction, and to direct the mind to the gospel remedy. But if when men are enquiring the way to Zion, there be none but the minister to give them information, things must be low indeed. It might be expected that there should be as many persons capable of giving direction on this subject as there are serious christians; for who that has obtained mercy by believing in Jesus can be at a loss to recommend him to another? It is a matter of fact, however, that though, as in cases of bodily disease, advisers are seldom wanting; yet, either for want of being sufficiently interested in the matter, or sufficiently skilful in the word of righteousness, there are but few, comparatively, whose advice is of any value. And this we apprehend to be one great cause of declension in many churches. Were we writing on ministerial defects, we should not scruple to acknowledge that much of the preaching of the present day is subject to the same censure: but in the present instance we must be allowed to suppose ourselves employed in teaching the good and the right way, and to solicit your assistance in the work. When the apostle tells the Hebrews that considering the time, "they ought to have been teachers," he does not mean that they ought all to have been ministers; but able to instruct any inquirer in the great principles of the gospel.

It has been already intimated that to give advice to a person under concern about salvation, it is necessary in the first place that he be *interested* on his behalf, and treat him in a free and affectionate manner. Some members of churches act as if they thought such things did not concern them, and as if their whole duty consisted in sending the party to the minister. A church composed of such characters may be opulent and respectable; but they possess nothing inviting or winning to an awakened mind. To cherish conviction, and give a right direction to such a mind, we must be free and affectionate. When a sinner begins to think of his condition, such questions as the following will often cross his mind: Was there ever such a case as mine before? Are there any people in the world who have been what I am, and who are now in the way to eternal life? If there be, who are they? But if while he is thinking what he must do to be saved, he neither sees nor hears any thing amongst you which renders it probable that such was ever your concern; if, as soon as a sermon is ended, he sees merely an exchange of civilities, and on leaving the place observes that all

the congregation immediately fall into conversation about worldly things, what can he think? He must either think there is nothing in religion, or if there be, that he must seek elsewhere for it. The voice of a christian church to those who attend upon their ministry should be that of Moses to Hobab, "We are journeying to the place of which the Lord hath said, I will give it you. Come thou with us, and we will do thee good: for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel!"

It is of great consequence to the well-being of a church that there be persons in particular in it who are accessible to characters of this description, and who shall take pleasure in introducing themselves to them. Barnabas, who by a tender and affectionate spirit, was peculiarly fitted for this employment, was acquainted with Saul while the other disciples were afraid of him. It was he that introduced him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.

Affection, however, is not the only qualification for this work: it requires that you be *skilful in the word of righteousness*: else you will administer false consolation, and may be instrumental in destroying instead of saving souls. Not that it requires any extraordinary talents to give advice in such cases: the danger arises principally from inattention and erroneous views of the gospel.

If, brethren, you would assist us in this delightful work, allow us to caution you against one prevailing error, and to recommend one important rule. The *error* to which we allude is, **TAKING IT FOR GRANTED THAT THE PARTY HAS NO DOUBTS AS TO THE GOSPEL WAY OF SALVATION, AND NO UNWILLINGNESS TO BE SAVED BY IT, PROVIDED GOD WERE BUT WILLING TO SAVE HIM.** Such are probably his thoughts of himself; and the only question with him is, whether he have an *interest* in Christ and spiritual blessings? Hence he is employed in searching for something in his religious experience which may amount to an evidence of his conversion; and in talking with you he expects you to assist him in the search. But do not you take this account of things as being the true one: it is founded in self-deception. If he understood and believed the gospel way of salvation he would know that God was willing to save any sinner who is willing to be saved by it. A willingness to relinquish every false confidence, every claim of preference before the most ungodly character, and every ground of hope save that which God hath

laid in the gospel is all that is wanting. If he have this, there is nothing in heaven or in earth in the way of his salvation. In conversing with such a character we should impress this truth upon him, assuring him that if he be straitened, it is not in God, but in his own bowels; that the doubts which he entertains of the willingness of God, especially on account of his sinfulness and unworthiness, are no other than the workings of a self-righteous opposition to the gospel. (as they imply an opinion that if he were less sinful, and more worthy, God might be induced to save him) and that if he be not saved, it will be owing to his thus continuing to stumble at the stumbling stone. Instead of allowing him to believe the gospel, and to be willing to be saved in the gospel way; while yet his very moans betray the contrary, we should labour to persuade him that he does not yet understand the deceit of his own heart; that if he were willing to come to Christ for life, there is no doubt of his being accepted; in short, that whenever he is brought to be of this mind, he will not only ask after the good way, but walk in it, and will assuredly find rest unto his soul.

The *rule* we recommend is this: **POINT THEM DIRECTLY TO THE SAVIOUR.** It may be thought that no christian can misunderstand or misapply this important direction, which is every where taught in the new testament. Yet if you steer not clear of the above *error* you will be unable to keep to it. So long as you admit the obstruction to believing in Christ to consist in something distinct from disaffection to the gospel way of salvation, it will be next to impossible for you to exhort a sinner to it in the language of the new testament. For how can you exhort a man to that which you think he desires with all his heart to comply with, but cannot? You must feel that such exhortations would be tantalizing and insulting him. You may indeed conceive of him as ignorant, and as such labour to instruct him: but your feelings will not suffer you to exhort him to any thing in which he is involuntary. Hence you will content yourselves with directing him to wait at the pool of ordinances, and it may be to pray for grace to enable him to repent and believe, encouraging him to hope for a happy issue in God's due time. But *this is not pointing the sinner directly to Christ.* On the contrary, it is furnishing him with a resting place short of him, and giving him to imagine, that duties performed while in unbelief are pleasing to God.

If you point the awakened sinner directly to the Saviour, after the manner of the new testament, you will not be employed in assisting him to analyse the distresses of his mind,

and administering consolation to him from the hope that they may contain some of the ingredients of true conversion, or at least the signs that he will be converted. Neither will you consider distress as ascertaining a happy issue, any otherwise than as it leads to Christ. If the question were, Do I believe in Jesus for salvation? then indeed you must inquire what effects have been produced? but it is very different where the inquiry is, What shall we do; or what must I do to be saved? The murderers of Christ were distressed: but Peter did not attempt to comfort them by alleging that this was a hopeful sign of their conversion, or by any way directing their attention to what was within them. On the contrary, he exhibited the Saviour, and exhorted them to repent and be baptized in his name. The same may be said of the Philippian jailor. He was in great distress, yet no comfort was administered to him from this quarter, nor any other, except the salvation of Christ. Him Paul and Silas exhibited, and in him directly exhorted him to believe. The promise of rest is not made to the weary and heavy laden, but to those who *come to Christ* under their burdens.

Once more: If you keep to this *rule*, though you will labour to make the sinner *sensible* of his sin, as till this is the case he will never come to the Saviour; yet you will be far from holding up this his sensibility as affording any warrant, qualification, or title, to believe in him, which he did not possess before. The gospel itself is the warrant, and not any thing in the state of the mind; though till the mind is made sensible of the evil of sin, it will never comply with it.

Fourthly: There is in all congregations and neighbourhoods a considerable number of people who are *living in their sins*, and in a state of *unconcernedness about salvation*. Our work in respect of them is, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear, to declare unto them their true character, to exhibit the Saviour as the only refuge, and to warn them to flee to him from the wrath to come. In this also there are various ways in which you may greatly assist us. If as heads of families you were to inquire of your children and servants what they have heard and noticed on the Lord's day, you would often find occasion to second the impressions made by our labours.— It is also of great consequence to be endued with that wisdom from above which dictates a word in season to men in our ordinary concerns with them. Far be it from us to recommend the fulsome practice of some professors, who are so full of what they call religion as to introduce it on all occasions, and that in a most offensive manner. Yet there is a way of dropping a hint to a

good purpose. It is admirable to observe the easy and inoffensive manner in which a patriarch introduced some of the most important truths to a heathen prince, merely in answer to the question, How old art thou? "The days of the years of my pilgrimage (said he) are an hundred and thirty: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers, in the days of their pilgrimage." This was insinuating to Pharaoh that he and his fathers before him were strangers and pilgrims upon the earth—that their portion was not in this world, but in another—that the life of man, though it extended to an hundred and thirty years, was but a few days—that those few days were mixed with evil: all which, if the king reflected on it, would teach him to set light by the earthly glory with which he was loaded, and to seek a crown which fadeth not away.

You are acquainted with many who do not attend the preaching of the word. If by inviting them to go with you an individual only should be caught, as we say, in the gospel net, you would save a soul from death. Such examples have frequently occurred. It is an established law in the divine administration that men both in good and evil should in a very great degree draw and be drawn by each other. The ordinary way in which the knowledge of God is spread in the world is, by every man saying to his neighbour and to his brother, Know the Lord. It is a character of gospel times that "Many nations shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." Add to this, by visiting your neighbours under affliction you would be furnished with many an opportunity of conversing with them to advantage. Men's consciences are commonly awake at such seasons, whatever they have been at others. It is as the mouth to the wild ass, in which they that seek her may find her.

Finally: Enable us to use strong language when recommending the gospel by its holy and happy effects. Unbelievers constantly object to the doctrine of grace as licentious; and if they can refer to your unworthy conduct, they will be confirmed, and we shall find it impossible to vindicate the truth of God without disowning such conduct, and it may be you on account of it: but if we can appeal to the upright, the temperate, the peaceable, the benevolent, the holy lives, of those among whom we labour, it will be of more weight than a volume of reasonings, and have a greater influence on the con-

sciences of men. A congregation composed of kind and generous masters, diligent and faithful servants, affectionate husbands and obedient wives, tender parents, dutiful children, and loyal subjects, will be to a minister what children of the youth are said to be to a parent, "As arrows in the hand of a mighty man—Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate."

These, brethren, are some of the principal ways in which we affectionately solicit your assistance in promoting the interest of Christ. In doing this we virtually pledge ourselves to be ready on all occasions to engage in it. We feel the weight of this implication. Let each have the others prayers that we may both be assisted from above, without which all the assistance we can render each other will be unavailing.

We remain in the bonds of the gospel, your affectionate brethren, &c.

Signed on behalf of the Association, by

ROBERT MILLS,  
*Moderator.*

#### BREVIATES.

*Tuesday evening* vi. Brother *Cave*, minister of the place, opened the meeting by prayer. Brother *Mills* of Sheepshead was chosen Moderator. Letters from the churches were read, and their contents minuted. Two Letters of request for admission to the Association from the newly-formed churches at Bugbrook, Northamptonshire, and Ivinghoe, Bucks, were referred to the meeting on Thursday morning. Brother *Nicholls* closed with prayer.

*Wednesday morning* vi. Met for prayer. Brethren *Berridge*, *Hall*, *Daniel*, *Wheeler*, *Douglas*, and *Fletcher*, were engaged.

—————*half-past* x. Brother *Crapps* prayed. Brother *Morris* preached from 2 Thess. iii. 5. *The Lord direct your hearts into the love of God.* Brother *Jarman* prayed. Brother *Blundel* preached from John xvii. 13. *And now come I to thee, and these things I speak in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves.* Brother *Fletcher* closed in prayer.

—————*evening* vi. Brother *Heighton* prayed. Brother *Fuller* preached from Acts xi. 23. *When he (Barnabas) came, and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and exhorted them all that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.* Brother *Sutcliff* concluded in prayer.

After the evening service, the Circular Letter, drawn up by brother *Fuller*, was read, and approved.

*Thursday morning vii.* Brother *Chown* prayed. Several ministers gave a brief account of their experience during the past year. Brother *Burton* prayed. The business of the Fund was settled. The churches at Bugbrook and Ivinghoe were received. Agreed on a trust for a place of worship at Oatby, given by Miss *Russell*. The next Circular Letter to be drawn up by brother *Sutcliff*, on *moral and positive obedience*. The Moderator concluded in prayer.

NB. The next Association to be held at SPALDING, in Whitsun week, 1807. Brother *Keely* and brother *Care* to preach.

PUT UP AT THE GEORGE.

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*State of the Churches since the last Association.*

<i>Added</i>	{	By profession of faith 146	}	<i>Diminished</i>	{	By death - 36	}
		By letter - - - - 12				By dismission 16	
		Restored - - - - 6				By exclusion 24	
		164				76	
		Clear increase 88					

**FINIS.**

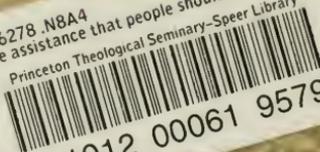
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