

The Ministries of Abel Morgan I and II and the Philadelphia Baptist Association in the Eighteenth Century

Mary K. Geiter

Mary K. Geiter is an independent scholar based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The early years of the Philadelphia Baptist Association and its transatlantic connections can be traced through two Welshmen sharing the same name of Abel Morgan. The first Abel was instrumental in developing the Philadelphia Association in the early years of the eighteenth-century. The second Abel was active as a minister during the period of the American Revolution. Through these two ministers and the Association we can trace some stresses and strains in the transatlantic link between Baptists in Britain and North America. As we shall see, the transatlantic relationship was severely tested by the War of American Independence. We can also draw some comparisons between Baptists in what became the tri-State web of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware and those in New England to the north and Virginia to the South. This is salutary since scholarly attention in Baptist history has focused on New England and the South, while research on the Baptists in the Middle region of North America has been relatively neglected.¹ Until recently, Quaker history has dominated the middle landscape leaving other areas, such as Baptist history, languishing. Consequently, the importance of the Philadelphia organization has only received passing notice.² Additionally, the role of the Morgans in the Association has not received due recognition, since arguably their contribution to Baptist history is at least as crucial as that of other leading Baptists such as Isaac Backus.

There was a significant difference in the circumstances of the Baptists in the middle colonies and those in New England and Virginia. The Baptists were challenged by the Congregationalists in the northern colonies and by the Anglicans in the south. In both areas, these dominant groups acted to suppress dissent, for example through requiring tithes payments or restricting religious practice. The middle colonies did not have such obstacles. The more tolerant atmosphere in them, where there was religious plurality, allowed for the flourishing of the Baptists alongside other groups such as the Quakers, Anglicans, Presbyterians and Lutherans. But such tolerance, while releasing Baptists from the

¹A major exception is Hymel M. Davis, *Transatlantic Brethren: The Reverend Samuel Jones and his Friends: Baptists in Wales, Pennsylvania and Beyond* (Bethlehem; Lehigh University Press, 1995). Dr. Davies uses Jones to present Baptist history from a Pennsylvanian rather than a New England perspective. He has, however, relatively little to say about the work of the two Abel Morgans.

² Anne Devereaux Jordan and J. M. Stifle, *The Baptists* (New York, 1990) pp.38-42; Leon H. McBeth *The Baptist Heritage* (1987), pp. 144-150, refer to the Philadelphia Baptist organization in a general context. The only study of the Association which gives recognition of its impact upon the Baptist organization is in a social survey by R.G. Torbet, *A Social History of the Philadelphia Baptist Association 1707-1940*, (Phila., 1944); See also Walter B. Shurden, *Associationalism Among Baptists in America: 17017-1814* (New York, 1980).

requirement to pay tithes, and suchlike oppressions, created its own problems in terms of doctrine and practices. Also while the tolerant atmosphere was conducive to the growth of Baptist churches in the middle colonies, it had the side effect of schism. Disputes over doctrine primarily to do with the laying on of hands, were threatening the congregational fabric. Because Baptist churches were independent of one another, doctrines could vary according to the type of Baptists comprising the church, whether they were particular or general. Although the lack of organization among the churches exacerbated the disputes, there was an ethnic dimension. The dominance of the English language threatened the Welsh speaking Baptists.

Disagreements raised over issues of the extent and nature of divine predestination were at the heart of the split between the Particular and General Baptists. The approach to resolving this problem of salvation also had a transatlantic dimension. While in England, the division was acute between the two, the American approach was to accept some degree of human responsibility. Therein lay the road to compromise for the General Baptists. There were other issues that split between and within congregations such as total immersion, infant versus adult baptism, and psalmody. Exacerbating the problem was the fact that Baptist churches were independent of one another and doctrines could vary accordingly. Such was the case between the churches of Pennepek in Bucks county and Newcastle, Delaware over the issue of the laying on of hands. Pennepek was indifferent to its incorporation while Newcastle made it an essential part of their church doctrine.³ Although compromise was affected in 1706, disagreements within congregations continued. In 1711, division within the Pennepek church over the choice of preacher was “occasioned by the turbulent spirit of an Irish preacher,” Thomas Shelby, who shut the newly arrived preacher, Thomas Burrows, out of the meeting house. Apparently, Shelby refused to give up his post to Burrows.⁴

Although the Baptists gained a foothold in Pennepek area on the northern outskirts of Philadelphia around 1688, and the Philadelphia Association was founded in 1707, it was not until Abel Morgan arrived in 1712 that the Philadelphia Baptist church became a vibrant center of a transatlantic and colonial network. Morgan’s migration to North America was typical of the push-pull factors that generated Welsh migration from the early 1680s when the Welsh Tract was created. The principal push factor was persecution, beginning with the English reaction which set in after the Exclusion Crisis ended in 1681. It surfaced again in 1710 with the trial of Dr. Sacheverall and the resurgence of high Toryism in England.⁵ By the time Morgan migrated in 1711, the effect of Tory dominance was to clampdown on dissenters, prohibiting them from holding public office and threatening to prohibit their own places of education – a threat made good in the 1714 the Schism Act.⁶

³ David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and other parts of the World* (New York, 1855), pp. 626-30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 602.

⁵ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith, Christianizing the American People* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 120-123.

⁶ The remnants of the Morgan library, inventoried at Rutgers University, attests to his interest in the impact of the Sacheverall trial upon the dissenters in England and Wales. They include the speeches of the whig Bishops

Coinciding with this were pull factors for migration. Originating from Allt Goch in Cardiganshire, Abel and his brother, Enoch, were active in setting up churches in South Wales. While Abel went on to Blaenau Gwent, Enoch crossed over to North America in 1710, where he was involved in founding a Baptist foothold in Delaware, no doubt as part of the development of the Welsh Tract. When the death of the pastor for Pennepek occurred, an invitation was sent to Morgan to fill the vacancy. Morgan's reputation was already established as an able speaker with a talent for organization, where he was often appointed to committees to resolve questions of discipline and doctrine. As a consequence of his skills, church memberships in Wales increased.

Upon his arrival, Morgan's impact upon the churches was almost immediate. He was able to contribute his experience in the Welsh association to resolving disputes among the American Baptist congregations. This was abundantly clear in 1712 when doctrinal disputes erupted in the Baptist church at Middletown, New Jersey. The Middletown congregation agreed to "submit to ye judgment of our Friends come from Philadelphia."⁷ The delegation from Philadelphia including Abel Morgan was invited to act as mediators in the dispute. Morgan and his colleagues were able to impose church discipline by getting the congregation to accept either the Confession of Faith or subscribe to the Covenant of Faith. To reinforce the support, Abel Morgan and one other minister, John Burrows, remained with the congregation affording ministerial help until the next year.

Abel was also aware of the tensions within the American churches that threatened to break transatlantic ties and Welsh influence. He expressed this concern in a letter to his former congregation at Blaenau Gwent, in Wales: "One of these congregations numbers about eighty and the other about on hundred and twenty members. There is but one entire regular church in all respects, but I think they are willing to be instructed how to act in conformity with the usual customs. By the help of God I have been enabled to bring about some reformation and I have a full desire to correct all deficiencies pertaining to their faith as far as lies in my power and give them directions for discipline and order. But it requires great caution and wisdom... Although many Welsh are in this country I fear but few are likely to keep up the true Protestant religion or their language. The English is swallowing up their language, though assisted by religion." He acted by imposing his version of the Confession of Faith in Welsh upon member churches, and he began to put together what became the first Welsh concordance to the Bible. The Confession of Faith was based upon the London Confession with two additional articles by Morgan, including the singing of hymns or psalmody, and the laying on of hands otherwise known as confirmation.

Abel Morgan was also anxious to promote theological education of Baptists in America. He encouraged formal training of ministers, the result of which was the establishment of an academy at Hopewell, NJ. Later, the Philadelphia Association sponsored

of Lincoln and Norwich in the House of Lords supporting the Impeachment in 1710 in which they stressed the plight of the dissenters.

7. Minutes of the Philadelphia Association.

the Academy of Rhode Island, later known as Brown University. His connections through correspondence with English Baptist ministers included petitions for books to be sent over. Two London Brethren, Thomas Hollis and John Taylor, donated a total of 36 folios and 22 octavos of the standard religious works. Such works as Daniel Neil's History of the Puritans and Jeremy Taylor's The Rule of Conscience and Christopher Ness, The History and Mystery of the New Testament attest to the direction that Morgan intended for the American churches.

He bound existing churches in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware into a framework of association, making Philadelphia the center to which fellow churches could look to provide a forum for advice and resolutions to problems. The Association would also act as the focus for planning and development of future churches as well as financially supporting existing programs. Disclaiming authority over local churches and acting in a voluntary capacity with emphasis upon advice and fellowship, Morgan was able to resolve church schism through compromise and organization. The Association's importance was increasingly being recognized by Baptist churches further afield than the middle colonies. Morgan's view of the role of the Association can be seen in a letter that lays out the usefulness of the organization. In practical terms, the Association would have credibility in the eyes of society for as a body, it would have the ability to help confederated churches in legal disputes. By introducing "joints and bands whereby the whole body is knit together and compacted for increase by that which every part supplieth," it could help Baptists in Massachusetts, for example, to fight tithing payments. Isaac Backus was able to get help from the Association in his fight against tithes. The Association helped to defray the cost of sending an appeal to the Commissioners of Trade and Plantation in London. It also funded the legal costs over land disputes such as in the case of the church in Ashfield, Massachusetts in their fight to regain their lands from the Presbyterians.⁸

The results of the efforts of the Philadelphia association, under Morgan's influence, were impressive. The number of Baptist churches grew from just a few at the beginning of the eighteenth century to over a 100 member churches by century's end, with an ever widening circle that eventually extended south to the Welsh Neck in South Carolina and north to New York. By the time of the American Revolution, the Philadelphia Association formed the pattern for later associations in Charleston, South Carolina (1751); Sandy Creek (1758) and Kehukee (1769), North Carolina; Kettocton, Virginia (1766); and Warren, Rhode Island (1767).

There were new strains on the transatlantic link with the outbreak of the war for American independence. These strains had a knock on affect within the colonial Baptist community. While there appeared to be consistent support for independence among the Baptists in New England, as Isaac Backus attested, the same could not be said in the middle region. Because of religious pluriformity in the tri-state area, there was less of a consensus of commitment to independence. The divergence of opinion was evident within the Middletown congregation under the ministerial leadership of the second Abel Morgan.

⁸. Morgan Edwards, History of the Pennsylvania Baptists, vol 1, pp.58-62

Born in Delaware in 1713, Morgan had been Middletown's pastor since 1738 and, it seems, as tireless in his efforts to spread the gospel as the first Abel. During the Great Awakening, it was said that "he travelled great distances in his old springless cart to preach Jesus." Wearing his iron rimmed glasses and his great beaver hat, he engaged in debates over baptismal issues and ordination procedures. His library reflected a well-read background and a full awareness of Gilbert Tennant and George Whitefield. The library, also included tracts concerning the Sacheverall Trial, no doubt handed down from his predecessor. Although the Philadelphia Association appeared to have supported overall independence, the congregations themselves were divided. As early as 1773, the Association appointed Abel Morgan to consider a plan and present a specimen of a circular letter to be addressed to the churches. What the letter contained is unknown, but a subsequent entry in the minutes of 1775 indicated the concern for the "increased troubles" between America and Britain. During this time, Morgan made a point of including in his sermons the subject of patriotism, particularly aimed at the Tory members of his congregation. When war came, he did not flinch when British troops marched through his parish after the battle of Monmouth in 1778; not only did he preach on the day of the battle in his own barn after the British took over the meeting house, but on that particular Sunday he delivered a sermon entitled "Who gave Jacob for a spoil and Israel to the robbers?" His use of the text from Isaiah is tantalizing. He may have been drawing an analogy between the sins of Israel and divine retribution and the sins of colonial society and the consequences of British repression.

Despite these tensions in the Baptist community caused by the War, the transatlantic link with Baptists in Britain survived. If anything it was strengthened, since British Baptists were united in their support for their brethren in America.

Abel Morgan II lived to see the independence of the United States recognized by Great Britain. He died on 24 November 1785 "after five months sore and tedious afflictions of several bodily disorders."⁹ Although he was a bachelor, he had an admirer, Sally Shepherd, of whom it was said "it was a byword that [she] worshiped God and Abel Morgan." "She wrote Rev Abel Morgan's epitaph, and broke two cart loads of clam shells in pieces with her hands which were put beneath and around the headstone ... to prevent its sinking."¹⁰

This preliminary investigation of the transatlantic Baptist links and the development of the Philadelphia Baptist Association suggests two observations. First, the connection between Wales and Baptists in the middle colonies was very strong in the time of the first Abel Morgan. As he predicted, however, the Welsh links were weakened by the time of the second Abel. Indeed the transatlantic link was severely strained during the American Revolution. But nevertheless it survived and was paradoxically perhaps even stronger at the end of the eighteenth century than at the beginning. Secondly, through the influence of such men as the Morgans the Philadelphia Baptist Association became the most important organization in colonial America and into the Early Republic.

⁹.Rutgers University archives: Middletown Baptist Church Records, p. 50.

¹⁰. John E. Stillwell, Historical and Genealogical Miscellany: Data relating to the settlement and settlers of New York and New Jersey (4 vols, 1906; reprinted 1970), iv, 281. Sally died a spinster in 1835 at the age of 98!