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**Insights about Baptist Associations with an Emphasis on Those Which Developed within the Southern Baptist Denomination**

**Compiled by**

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**Insight 001:** “The earliest Baptist association which can be historically documented was in England in the 1650s.” “The district associations served so well on the English scene that the idea was brought to America and planted in Philadelphia. Thus, the oldest district Baptist association on the American scene was in that city in 1707.” “From Philadelphia the idea flowed southward and again became fixed as an acceptable mode of Baptist intercooperation. The first district Baptist association in the South was established in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1751.” (James L. Sullivan, *Baptist Polity: As I See It*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983, pp. 95-96)

**Insight 002: “**The scriptural bases for the district association had been sound in such passages as Acts 15 and Galatians 2. There were records, also, in the Bible about early benevolent endeavors in the New Testament on a cooperative basis as seen in Acts 11:27-30, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, Romans 15:15-32, and 1 Corinthians 16:2-6. In these records, no church exercised control over any other body. All felt free to participate voluntarily according to their willingness and abilities.” (James L. Sullivan, *Baptist Polity: As I See It*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983, p. 96)

**Insight 003: “**The basic idea of the district association was essentially the same on each side of the Atlantic with the feeling that there was a scriptural basis for it. A method now had been found whereby Baptists could work together ardently without compromise or the sacrifice of autonomy on the part of any congregation.” (James L. Sullivan, *Baptist Polity: As I See It*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983, p. 96)

**Insight 004:** “The associations existed to help the churches be the churches which God wanted them to be and to be servants of those churches in areas where interchurch activities and support were needed and in which movements could be begun and supported. Such causes had been far too large for any local congregation acting on its own. That basic idea still holds, as the Baptist association remains until today a most vital unit in the denominational structure.” (James L. Sullivan, *Baptist Polity: As I See It*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983, p. 96)

**Insight 005:** “While it (associations), the state Baptist conventions, and the Southern Baptist Convention are equidistant organizationally from the local church, the association is still in a favored position. It is much closer geographically to the churches and made up of duly-elected messengers sent directly from those churches. This gives the association the advantage of quick action, more personal understanding, and more frequent and meaningful direct contacts.” (James L. Sullivan, *Baptist Polity: As I See It*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983, pp. 96-97)

**Insight 006:** “The association became and still is a major force in the denomination interpreting itself and its programs to the churches. Warm fellowships can be experienced among congregations when many of the members are individually known to associational leaders and workers.” (James L. Sullivan, *Baptist Polity: As I See It*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983, p. 97)

**Insight 007:** “In some of the earlier associations reference was occasionally made to an ‘association of churches’ rather than an ‘association of messengers.’ The mode of operation, however, has been generally the same. Each church has had its own voice in the associational life, and the association has been a servant of the churches, never a competitor with them.” (James L. Sullivan, *Baptist Polity: As I See It*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983, p. 97)

**Insight 008:** “Some of the associations, especially those in inner cities, are larger and more complex in structure than some state Baptist conventions. They own buildings and employ a host of specialized workers in various fields to serve in many ways, as the churches have requested.” (James L. Sullivan, *Baptist Polity: As I See It*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983, p. 98)

**Insight 009:** “Associations have and continue to render a fundamental service. Occasionally someone might hear a pessimistic comment such as ‘The district Baptist association has served its day somewhat like the Baptist academy and should be phased out.’ Anyone who speaks in that vein is talking in total ignorance either of past history or the present situation. The continuing high place of the association in the denomination is most significant. It needs encouragement and ardent support on the part of churches and the people, and its services are indispensable if our Baptist witness is to reach it highest potential in any given locality.” (James L. Sullivan, *Baptist Polity: As I See It*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983, pp. 98-99)

**Insight 010:** “New churches or existing ones desiring fellowship and participation in local associations are carefully screened by the association involved to make sure that they will fit into the Baptist way of doing things, as well as that they hold to the basic doctrinal beliefs of Baptists. The association is an appropriate point for any screening of churches done within the entire denomination because of the proximity of the other churches making these judgments.” (James L. Sullivan, *Baptist Polity: As I See It*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983, p. 99)

**Insight 011:** “State Baptist conventions and agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention show real wisdom when they project and promote programs in cooperation with the district Baptist association as a matter of general practice. This keeps local programs coordinated, and the churches discover easier ways to plan their own internal activities and organizations.” (James L. Sullivan, *Baptist Polity: As I See It*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983, p. 99)

**Insight 012:** “The second Baptist association in America, and the first in the South, was formed at Charleston, South Carolina, by Oliver Hart in 1751. Hart had been active in the Philadelphia Association, and clearly that body provided a model for the Charleston effort. Only four churches made up the association in 1751, with twenty-six affiliated by 1796. From the first, some of the churches treated the association lightly. Available minutes later in the century show that rarely more than half of associated churches sent reports to the annual meeting, and fewer sent messengers.” (H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987, p. 242.)

**Insight 013:** “Several associations in the South adopted the Philadelphia Confession, beginning with Charleston in 1767. The Philadelphia Confession served as the major doctrinal statement for Baptists in the South until the rise of the New Hampshire Confession in 1834.” (H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987, p. 242.)

**Insight 014:** “From the beginning, the association (Charleston) helped churches obtain pastors, arranged pulpit supplies for churches temporarily without pastors, and later in the century sent preachers to frontier areas to preach and establish churches. Thus they fixed in the South the concept of missionary work through denominational channels.” (H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987, p. 242.)

**Insight 015:** “What authority does an association have, and how can it exercise that authority without compromising the independence of affiliated churches?” “By the mid-century (of the 1700s) the (Philadelphia) association referred to churches as ‘belonging to this association,’ offered advice to churches on both doctrinal and practical issues, sent ‘helps’ or representatives to assist in cases of local church discipline, and helped to accredit, and when need be to discredit, ministers.” (H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987, p. 243.)

**Insight 016:** Benjamin Griffin in the mid-1700s was commissioned by the Philadelphia Baptist Association to prepare an essay “‘respecting the power and duty of an Association.’” His essay “confirmed church ordinances, discipline, and ordination as local church and not denominational functions. However, churches should associate with others when possible for mutual counsel and strength.” (H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987, pp. 243-44.)

**Insight 017:** Discipline of church members was addressed early in the life of associations The Benjamin Griffin *Essay* made it clear, however, that the association had only the power to withdraw its fellowship, they might urge the churches to exclude members involved in erroneous practice or teaching, ‘but excommunicate they cannot.’ That power belongs only to the church.” (H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987, p. 244.)

**Insight 018:** “W. W. Barnes pointed to the Philadelphia Association moving from a union composed of representatives to a union composed of churches as a major turning point in the development of Baptist ecclesiology.” (H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987, p. 244.)

**Insight 019:** Associational functions emerging in the 18th century: “The association served as a doctrinal monitor. In time, most of the associations adopted a confession of faith, and some made adherence a condition of affiliation. Churches that departed significantly from Baptist doctrines were to be dealt with by the association and excluded if they did not recant.” (H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987, p. 244.)

**Insight 020:** Associational functions emerging in the 18th century: “The association advised on Baptist practices. Such issues as singing in worship, the marriage of slave members, dealing with divorce and remarriage, what offenses merit church discipline, whether members who have not moved may move their membership, the role of women in church, how to choose deacons and how to define their duties, whether to dedicate infants, whether to accept non-Baptist immersion, and how to use ‘vacant’ days of worship (when no preacher was present).” (H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987, p. 245.)

**Insight 021:** Associational functions emerging in the 18th century: “Associations served as clearing houses in personnel matters. Churches seeking pastors and pastors seeking settlement often worked through associations. The association also aided ‘vacant’ churches by helping them find temporary supply preachers, often by rather arbitrarily assigning neighboring pastors to take turns supplying. Associations helped ‘credential’ preachers by endorsing them and, conversely, warned churches again unworthy or unorthodox preachers.” (H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987, p. 245.)

**Insight 022:** Associational functions emerging in the 18th century: “Associations promoted benevolent work, primarily in the three areas of Christian education, the struggle for religious liberty, and home missions.” (H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987, p. 246.)

**Insight 023:** Associational functions emerging in the 18th century: “Associations provided fellowship for lonely Baptists. In areas sparsely settled, with Baptists at best unpopular and at worst severely persecuted, the opportunity to share with others like-minded was important.” (H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987, p. 246.)

**Insight 024:** Associational functions emerging in the 18th century: “Associations provided models for preaching. Peaching was always a major feature of association meetings, and churches put forward their best preachers. The younger ministers, and the less capable, heard Baptist preaching at its best and learned thereby.” (H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987, p. 246.)

**Insight 025:** “The district association was the earliest and sole organizational expression of the Baptist denomination in America for over a century and has continued to occupy a place of prominence. A study of the association is important not only for an understanding of early Baptist ecclesiology but also for tracing changes that have occurred.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*, p. 4, quoting G. R. Ford, “The District Associations of Virginia, 1766-1950”, p. xvii. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974.)

**Insight 26:** In his 1961 study on Baptist district associations in Virginia from 1766 to 1950, G.R. Ford “concluded that the association has changed in theory and practice from a fellowship churches to a unit of denominational promotion. The theological base of the association was lost to denominational organization because of the lack of a stated associational theory. The locus of associational initiative shifted from the local church to the various state conventions and the SBC.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*, p. 5, summarizing G. R. Ford, “The District Associations of Virginia, 1766-1950”. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974.)

**Insight 27:** **“Advent of the association**. —The Baptist association, like the denomination itself, was an experimental development within the context of seventeenth century English culture. The earliest instance of inter-congregational action by Baptist congregations that is subject to historical verification dates back to 1644. Seven Particular Baptist congregations met in London to produce a written confession of their faith.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*, p. 5. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974.)

**Insight 28:** “Baptist relationships between local congregations were expressed through the regular meetings of their designated delegates. (These representatives are commonly called ‘messengers’ in South Baptist circles today.) Through their messengers the local congregations could communicate with each other. They share in the decisions and actions of the organized expression of Baptist connectionalism. However, the decisions of the delegates were personal and did not place any binding commitment on their local congregation as a whole. In fact, associational documents explicitly affirm that the association exercises no church power over the local congregations.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*, p. 10. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974.)

**Insight 29:** “Hugh Wamble suggests the following five major causative purposes in the development of associationalism: (1) to provide security and fellowship for small isolated groups; (2) to issue a confession to demonstrate Baptist theological orthodoxy, political innocence and moral purity; (3) to preserve denominational unity; (4) to propagate Baptist views; (5) to maintain fellowship through information, assistance and cooperation.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*, p. 11. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974.)

**Insight 30:** “The scattered condition of Baptist congregations under oppressive conditions encouraged inter-congregational relationships. The small, isolated congregations needed the encouragement of meeting occasionally with the larger group of like-minded believers. When congregations could no longer meet together because of numbers, representatives met for the congregations.” “The association was a practical development to fulfill a felt need for communication with the larger religious community.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*, p. 12. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974.)

**Insight 31:** When it comes to Baptist associations and other denominational structures developed throughout the years, “the obligation of one congregation to care for another did not demand that the organization expressing that obligation have authority over the mutually obligated congregations. For Baptists, the tradition of congregational obligation for interdependency could not be equated with organizational authority.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*, p. 13. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974.)

**Insight 32:** “The emphasis of Baptist forefathers on the laity rather than the hierarchy may have encouraged occasional religious revival within the denomination. It did contribute to the vitality of Baptist associational life. Associational relations were based directly on the congregation and not mediated through the office of the minister.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*, p. 13. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974.)

**Insight 33:** “Baptist theology would not allow individuals or a local congregation to be content with their own spiritual prosperity. If all was not well with a neighboring congregation of like faith and order, it was their obligation to do something to remedy the situation.” Baptists were prompted “to create relationships expressing congregational interdependency rather than to be content with the local congregation’s hope for the life to come. Associationalism arose within a theological directive to create the good society, which included sister congregations.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*, pp. 13-14. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974.)

**Insight 34:** “Seventeenth century English Baptists were motivated by theoretical belief as well as by practical need to develop inter-congregational relationships. Thus, the form of the Baptist association was a consequence of Baptists’ ecclesiology, their understanding of the nature of the church as expressed in her order. It was not just an expedient organizational device. Nor was it an expedient copy of contemporary religious movements.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*, p. 15. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974.)

**Insight 35:** “The association was a charismatic development to communicate mutual care between congregations. The principle of mutual care—the concern of fellowship *(koinonia)*—was the practical as well as the theoretical basis of Baptist connectionalism as expressed in the association.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*, p. 15. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974.)

**Insight 36:** “The association, then, functions to relate congregations as objects of one another’s Christian concern or service. The association does not relate congregations as subjects of one another’s authority or rule. Thus the association reflects Baptist connectionalism, a field or tension between two accept accepted theological poles: the particular church and the universal church.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, pp. 15-16.)

**Insight 37:** “Both traditions—congregational autonomy and congregational community—exist side by side in Baptist associational history. The tradition of interdependent fellowship produced ecclesiological organization. The tradition of independent autonomy prevented ecclesiastical organization.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.16.)

**Insight 38:** “The Baptist movement included a protest ‘against hierarchical, authoritarian and centralizing tendencies of the Protestant ecclesiastical movements in this origin.’ (Harrison, 1959) Undoubtedly, the rise of capitalism emphasized an individualistic protest which influenced the religious community. (Yinger, 1957) Particular Baptists were part of the religious community that develop within the capitalistic atmosphere.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.16.)

**Insight 39:** “Baptists believed in the reality of the local church. Baptists recognized the immediacy of the lordship of Christ. This doctrine is popularly labeled ‘the priesthood of the believer.’ The believer was allowed direct access to God in Christ without necessity of clergy or organized religion. If this privilege belonged to the individual, it could not be denied to the group. The local congregation had as much biblical right to be subject to the direct lordship of Christ as did the individual. No authorized hierarchy was needed to govern the local congregation. In fact, human councils with coercive power might hinder the freedom of God to guide His congregation.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.16.)

**Insight 40:** “The local congregation as a whole was under grace, not under law. Ecclesiastical councils with coercive authority would violate the voluntary basis of Baptist faith, as would dominance by the secular state. As C. P. St. Amant says: ‘Faith coerced is not faith but assent based upon force.’ (St. Amant, 1964) Mutual care was commanded of God but was not to be coerced by man.” (Hudson, 1953) (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, pp.16-17.)

**Insight 41:** “The local congregation did not exist because of the association; the association existed because of the local congregation. The local congregation needed the larger community of like faith and order. The local congregation was also obligated to care for sister congregations. But the fulfillment of this need and this obligation by means of the association was not all that was necessary to create the church within the local congregation. The presence of Christ was that fundamental necessity that could not be compelled by man or organization. Therefore, the association could not replace the lordship of Christ for the local congregation.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.17.)

**Insight 42:** “Contrary to popular opinion, W. S. Hudson affirms that the earliest Baptist association in America was formed in 1670 by four General Baptist congregations in Rhode Island. (Hudson, 1953) The central stream of Baptist associational history in America, however, lies through the Philadelphia Baptist Association, formed in 1707.” “The Philadelphia Association asserted a normative influence on Baptists in American especially through its Confession of Faith. The Confession was a revision of the Second London Confession of 1677.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.23.)

**Insight 43:** “An indigenous source of many Baptist associations now within the Southern Baptist Convention was the Separatist Baptist movement. The movement was rooted in New England Congregationalism, not in General or Regular (Particular) Baptist heritage. The Great Awakening produced converts whose evangelistic fervor separated them from established Congregationalism in New England. Accepting believer’s baptism to protect church purity, they understood themselves to be Baptists.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.23.)

**Insight 44:** “Shubael Stearns led a group south to Sandy Creek, North Carolina, which was a major point of embarkation for the frontier. There they founded the Sandy Creek Baptist Church in 1755. In 1758 they organized the Sandy Creek Baptist Association of several offspring churches. The Sandy Creek Association spawned many more associations, such as the four created in 1784: Dover, Orange, Middle District, and Roanoke.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, pp.23-24.)

**Insight 45:** “Historically, Baptist connectionalism has developed four major organized expressions: the council, society, convention, and association. Of these four, the association has been primary.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.24.)

**Insight 46:** Six functions of early associations in Virginia. “(1) guardian of the fellowship, (2) mutual edification, (3) providing a regular ministry, (4) denominational spokesman, (5) evangelism and (6) missions.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.26. quoting G. R. Ford, “The Baptist District Associations of Virginia, 1766-1950”, 1961, p. 185.)

**Insight 47:** “By 1900 the association ceased to express concern for the internal life of associated congregations *per se* and began to express concern for them only as agents of denominational outreach.” G. R. Ford “cites three evidences of this: (1) the shift from associational discipline for doctrinal deviation to associational discipline for failure to report denominational activity; (2) the shift from representation of equal congregations to proportionate numbers of unequal congregations; and (3) the shift of terminology from ‘representative’ to ‘messenger,’ signifying the replacement of congregation union with individual participation.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, pp.26-27. Referencing G. R. Ford, ) “The Baptist District Associations of Virginia, 1766-1950”, 1961, p. 224.)

**Insight 48:** “As missionary activities expanded, the associations became prime promoters of the various denominational agencies and institutions and of the auxiliaries of the church. (G. R.) Ford contends that by the last quarter of the 1800’s promotion had become the prime task of the association.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.27.)

**Insight 49:** “The rise of missionary promotion eclipsed the fellowship function. As evidence for this, (G. R.) Ford cites (1) the change in the annual meeting from a forum of discussion to a plebiscite on denominational agency reports, and (2) the change in organizational structure to include offices and committees to promote specific agencies and mission projects.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.27.)

**Insight 50:** “(G. R.) Ford concludes that these changes indicate that the association (in the late 1800’s) is viewed no longer as the expression of mutual concern of one congregation for another but as the agency of an institutionalized denomination. Thus, the SBC initiates programs that are mediated by promotion through state conventions and thence through associations to the location congregations. He contends that the essential nature of the association has changed from an ecclesiological expression of connectionalism to a denominational instrument of promotion.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.27.)

**Insight 51:** From the study of the annual reports of 28 associations from 1963, Russell concluded “the missionary concern of the association has lost its doctrinal basis in favor of a denominational orientation and that the function of promotion has been added to this concern. In all the reports studied, only three printed their articles of faith, which express the doctrinal basis of an association. Six other reports simply identified their articles of faith, generally the ‘Baptist Faith and Message’ adopted by the SBC in 1925. Eighteen of the constitutions made no reference to the doctrinal basis of their association at all. Moreover, seventeen of the constitutions gave promotion in some form as the chief purpose of that association! Six of their seventeen made promotion of Southern Baptist causes their main purpose. Only eleven constitutions suggested fellowship as their objective.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.29-30.)

**Insight 52:** In the Sunday School Board’s study course book on the association in 1959, author F. S. Dowis said “The association promotes all the programs of the denomination and teaches methods for carrying out these programs. . . . The state mission boards and the Southern Baptist Convention agencies, auxiliaries, commissions, and committees are almost wholly dependent upon associational organizations and contacts for the promotion of their work. . . . The association should ever be conscious that it is a vital unit between our churches and our denominational leadership. Its function, then, is to develop understanding of a denominational program of work in the churches.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.30-31 referring to and quoting S. F. Dowis, *Associational Guidebook* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1959), pp 5, 6, 8.)

**Insight 53:** “As the state convention developed, the flow of mission money was diverted from the associations to the conventions. This shift of the locus of power caused a shift in the concern of responsible members of the denomination. It easily follows that if the association is devoid of practical power, it can be of little effect on the life of the interrelated congregations. With the locus of power and the focus of responsibility shifted to the conventions, any charismatic initiative by denominational leadership was subjected to the fiduciary basis and the impersonal relationships of convention structure.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.31-32.)

**Insight 54:** “The change of the association from a moral fellowship of doctrinal bodies to an organized unit of functional congregations is a consequence of institutionalism. Promotional organization is the natural outcome of missionary emphasis.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.33.)

**Insight 55:** “The lack of explicit statements on church order have allowed institutionalism to run rampant over Baptist associationalism.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.34.)

**Insight 56:** “Around 1900, convention personnel began to promote local church organizations through the association. This marked a significant change in the relationship of these bodies and in the function of the convention. Now the church became an object of, not just a source of support for, the program of the convention. The locus of initiative in denominational activities had completely shifted from the local congregation to the convention. In turn, the association changed from an instrumentality of the local congregation to an instrumentality of the conventions.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.34.)

**Insight 57:** “In 1944 Courts Redford initiated the Home Mission Board’s emphasis on associational missions. The work of the Home Mission Board in the area of the association has contributed significantly to the current revival of interest in the nature and work of the association.” “The Home Mission Board did not use the association to promote its own program. The emphasis on associational missions made the association the subject and the implement of the action.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.35.)

[A personal note from George Bullard: “With the mention of Courts Redford in Russell Bennett’s book he has now mentioned an associational advocate who I first met as a 9 year old boy in 1959 through my father and came to appreciate his denominational and missions “statespersonship”. I knew him in SBC missions networks until his death in 1977.”]

**Insight 58:** “In 1959, Arthur B. Rutledge brought a new administrative approach to the Missions Division and later to the executive leadership of the Home Mission Board of shifting supervisory control to the field of action rather than in the bureaucratic offices.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.35.)

[A personal note from George Bullard: “Arthur Rutledge came from missions administration with Texas Baptists and led the process of cooperative missions with cooperative agreements with state conventions. This reduced competition between national, state, and to some degree associational leadership and led to a crescendo of the importance and role of the association. He is also a person I knew well until his death in 1977.”]

**Insight 59:** “M. Wendell Belew, pioneer leader of the associational administration program, began a training program in 1961 for superintendents of associational missions that resulted in a rising level of competency among these associational executives.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.35.)

[A personal note from George Bullard: “In Wendell Belew we have another giant in Home Mission Board-related missions work, what was called pioneer missions in the states outside the traditional South. He was also a great leader in associational missions and contextual ministry. A friend and mentor indeed to me and many, many others.”]

**Insight 60:** “An increasing number of associational superintendents through Convention-wide conference began to create an autonomous consciousness at this denominational level that tends to counteract bureaucratic centralism.” In 1959 procedures were initiated “to secure goal-setting from grass roots sentiment, so far as possible.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.35.)

**Insight 61:** “It is evident that the association is dependent on the local congregation for existence. It drives its nature from that of the local congregation. To the extent that the local congregation is the *church* and, equally, an *expression* of the church, the Body of Christ or the household of God, the association is also an expression of the church, for the association arises out of the local congregation.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.52.)

**Insight 62:** A note from George Bullard: “The next several Insights cover the debate that arose in the early 1960s as to whether a Baptist association is composed of the churches who are members of the association, or is composed of the messengers sent from churches to associational gatherings – particularly the annual meeting. Pay close attention to see if you believe in the history covered by this book if the matter was resolved.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974.)

**Insight 63:** A study committee of the SBC Inter-Agency Council in 1962 tentatively adopted the following statement: “A Baptist association is an autonomous body composed of messengers elected by autonomous Baptist churches, usually located in a given geographical area, which are voluntarily associated and organized for Christian fellowship and co-operation in the advancement of Christ’s kingdom.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.73.)

**Insight 64:** In 1963 the full Inter-Agency Council did not accept the statement of its study committee that associations are composed of messengers from churches because a sufficient number of participants in the larger body felt associations were composed of churches. The debate was in response to the concept that if churches are members of our association then they are giving up part of their sovereignty by joining any other body. (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.73.)

**Insight 65:** At the now famous Gulfshore Baptist Assembly associational missions conference in 1963 on the role and function of the Baptist association, “R.A. Baker, professor of church history at Southwestern Baptist Seminary, affirmed that ‘it is a basic principle, however, in Baptist ecclesiology that Baptist churches do not join any general body of any sort; rather, they send messengers to all of them—to the association, to the state convention, and to the Southern Baptist Convention.’” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.73.)

**Insight 66:** One study group at the 1963 Gulfshore conference on Baptist associations, included the following statement in their report: “A Baptist association is a self-determining spiritual body of messengers from churches which are in voluntary basic agreement as to faith and practice, providing a program of assistance what will aid cooperating churches desiring to reach their full potential of spiritual growth and service in keeping with the commission of Christ.” But . . . (see next Insight). (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.74.)

**Insight 67:** “But at the bottom of the same page of the report, the following minority statement was printed: ‘There is some difference in thinking as to who makes up the association—the churches themselves or the messengers. Some further study should probably be given to this question.’’ (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.74.)

**Insight 68:** Among many characteristics that have sought define associations are at least these three: “The Baptist association usually covers a limited geographical area.” “The Baptist association has regular meetings of messengers, delegates or representatives from the cooperating congregations.” “The congregations represented in the association have a common doctrine and polity, though they are not unanimous on all points.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.79.)

**Insights 69:** A fourth historical defining characteristics of associations is this: “The association is self-determining and autonomous, subject to the immediate lordship of Christ. Theoretically, it is not subject to other organizations in authority. Neither are the associated congregations theoretically bound by any decision of the association. All constitutions of associations seem to go to pains to respect the autonomy of the associated congregations.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.79.)

**Insight 70:** A fifth historical defining characteristics of associations is this: “Membership in the association is voluntary, while the association maintains the right to refuse to seat messengers for theological or moral deviation. However, the study of associational history does not give a unanimous voice to either the messenger or the congregation as the constituent of the association.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, pp.79-80.)

**Insight 71:** Russell Bennett offers for dialogue the following definition of a Baptist association. “The Baptist association is an autonomous cooperative, usually in a given geographic area, voluntarily organized by autonomous Baptist churches of similar faith and practice, meeting regularly through equal messengers to accomplish purposes suitable to the related congregations.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.87.)

[George Bullard poses this question: Is Bennett suggesting that churches create and are members of the association, but are governed by equal messengers from the member churches?]

**Insight 72:** Ultimately the SBC Inter-Agency Council did agree on the following definition for a Baptist association: “A Baptist association is a self-determining Baptist interchurch community, created and sustained by the churches affiliated with her and responsible to them through their messengers, in which the churches foster their fellowship.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.87.)

**Insight 73:** “The Baptist association is a fellowship of churches on mission in their setting.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.87.)

[George Bullard: From 1981-1985 when I was on the staff of the Associational Missions Division of the Home Mission Board this was the popular, short definition of a Baptist association which we used. It had been coined by Lloyd Corder of the Home Mission Board in 1971.]

**Insight 74:** “In keeping with Baptist polity, the association is subject ecclesiastically to no higher council, society or convention. Nevertheless, the association seeks to obey the mind of Christ as understood by the majority voice of the ‘equal messengers.’ No hierarchy to medicate the mind of Christ exists in this ecclesiological structure. The association, like the local congregation, can be independent of human agency but must be dependent on the leadership of the Spirit.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, pp. 88-89.)

**Insight 75:** “The local congregation is free to join the association, if it is of similar faith and practice, and free to separate from the association. Christ is Lord of the local congregation, the gathered church, but under Christ neither the local congregation nor the association exists to be ministered unto but to minister. The interrelations expressed in the association are for voluntary service, not human lordship.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p.89.)

**Insight 76:** “The association expresses Baptist connectionalism—corporate brotherly affection. As an expression of connectionalism, the association is not an expedient method of work but an essential expression of the household of God.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p. 89.)

**Insight 77:** “It (the association) is essential, not only because of the command for mutual concern, but also because the association is the only Baptist organization of connectionalism based solely on doctrine—like faith and order—not just adopted programs .” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p. 89.)

**Insight 78:** “The corporate identity of the association involves a question of theology. Can a sovereign church join a cooperative? The question is misleading. The local congregation derives sovereignty from her sovereign Lord. A local congregation must not permit an ‘ecclesiastical’ organization to come between her and the voice of her sovereign Lord. Neither must a local congregation permit ecclesiological isolationism to hinder mutual concern.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p. 90.)

**Insight 79:** “The very genius of the associational pattern is that it allows ecclesiological relation and avoids ecclesiastical dominance. Voluntary membership in a cooperative of congregations of like faith and order does not violate Christ’s sovereignty nor does it coerce the voluntary action of the local congregation.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p. 90.)

**Insight 80:** “Local congregations, as members of the household go God or the body of Christ, do belong to each other. The association expresses that unity for congregations of like faith and practice.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p. 90.)

**Insight 81:** "The phrase 'to accomplish purposes suitable to these related churches' distinguishes the association from the society. The society is composed of individuals for a single purpose, such as theological education or foreign mission support." (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p. 91.)

**Insight 82:** "As an ecclesiological organization, the association has purposes that reflect the member congregations. Though many of those purposes are common to all associations, many associational purposes are particular. Therefore, no list of purposes is necessary to distinguish the association in definition." (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p. 91.)

**Insight 83:** "To deny congregations the right of membership in an association is not necessary to protect the autonomy of the local Baptist congregation and the principles of Baptist polity. The very nature of cooperation or confederation insures this protection. But to deny congregations as such the right of association, and to affirm that only individuals can be associational members is to damage the New Testament requirement for mutual oversight. The principle of corporate responsibility for mutual concern and service is admitted even by some who, trying to protect the autonomy of the local church, deny that congregations can be members of the association." (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p. 92.)

**Insight 84:** “In Baptist doctrine, the church is both a local congregation and the total fellowship of all believers. Because the church is both particular and universal, churches of congregational polity are both independent and interdependent. That is, a Baptist Church is not only subject to the lordship of Christ; it is also concerned for the neighboring churches of like faith and order. The association is one expressions of mutual concern among kindred congregations. However, institutionalism has overshadowed this view of the association. Today the association is more often considered a denominational agency than a doctrinal fellowship.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p. 97.)

**Insight 85:** “Viewed from the nature of the church, that is ecclesiologically, the association may be defined as an organized expression of the spiritual relation of kindred congregations. It is made up of churches, not just interested individuals. Nevertheless, the association does not exist to exercise authority over the member churches, but to provide a means for their mutual and cooperative service.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p. 98.)

**Insight 86:** What was the objective of the Charleston Baptist Association according to Wood Furman? “’The objective of the union was declared to be the promotion of the Redeemer’s kingdom, by the maintenance of love and fellowship, and by mutual consultations for the peace and welfare of the churches.’ In this statement, however, the promotion of the Kingdom is the objective, and love, fellowship and consultation because the means to that end.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, pp. 99-100. With quote from Wood Furman, *A History of the Charleston Association of Baptist Churches in the State of South Carolina* (Charleston: J. Hoff Press, 1811) p. 9.)

**Insight 87:** "Several factors, both essential and existential, contributed historically to the rise of the association. One question relevant to these factors needs yet to be answered in this study. Did these factors emphasize the internal development or the external growth of the denomination? Was the main factor in the cause of the association mutual care of missions?” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, pp. 108-109.)

**Insight 88:** "It seems logical to conclude that associationism developed because the churches had a similar kind of life, a common faith and order, rather than because they performed similar functions or had a common purpose. Mutual concern seems more fundamental to associationism than missionary obligation. This is not to deny outreach an inherent place in the Christian community but to recognize that mutual concern overshadows outreach in the New Testament emphasis.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, pp. 110.)

**Insight 89:** "The Baptist association is an organization that expresses the relationship of local congregations of like faith and order. Theologically, the congregations are each independent in Christ as immediate Lord and yet interdependent in Christ as mutual Lord. Local churches, free and gathered, have a mutual interdependency of watchcare. Watchcare in Christ is expressed in mutual service, not in ecclesiastical authority, for there is no hierarchy evidenced in the intention of Jesus.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, pp. 110.)

**Insight 90:** "The associational relationship arises from the similar life expressed in the common faith and order of the kindred churches. The relationship may not be necessary to the objective of the individual church, for the local congregation is fully the church when Christ is present. Nevertheless, the relationship is an essential consequence of the life of the church when confronted by other churches of like faith and order.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, pp. 110.)

**Insight 91:** "What are the results of stating functional purposes rather than mutual communication as the objective of the association? The members are related mechanically as work units rather than personally as human groups. The local church becomes the object of a program rather than a participant in a community. When impersonal functions are the ultimate reason for association, the organization become impersonal. To relate churches on the basis of function is to destroy the charismatic basis intended for Christian relationship.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, pp. 110.)

(Note: The use of the word "charismatic" in this reference speaks to the traditional definition of "charismatic" as expressing compelling charm which inspires devotion in others and not an ecstatic worship expression.)

**Insight 92:** ".Associational promotion of denominational purposes may produce conformity, but such procedure may not be the most effective means to create unity. Unity is a consensus more than a uniformity, whereas conformity may be a superficial uniformity without consensus. Unity is inherently democratic in essence, for it arises from individual concurrence. Unity is the result of the democracy of dialogue, not the tyranny of monologue. Denominational agencies that suggest standards, programs and purposes by monologue may actually militate against a vital unity” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, pp. 116.)

**Insight 93:** "Denominational agencies may benefit more in the long run by entering into the colloquy of the association on a reciprocal basis and providing resources when requested than by promoting prepared programs for associational adoption. Although an agency may not intend to domineer the association, suggestions presented before they are requested often appear as authoritative directives rather than as optional recommendations. The unity of the local churches is a value to denominational agencies, but that unity is better achieved through colloquy than only through promotion.” (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p. 117.)

**Insight 94:** "The popular image of the association has shifted from that of a fellowship of churches to that of an agent or unit of denominational hierarchy. The chief available counterbalance to denominational centralization is revitalized associationalism. The vitality of associationalism lies not in promotional purposes but in a dialogical objective." (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p. 117.)

**Insight 95:** "The primary feature of the local church is its spiritual life, not its organizational structure. If denominational agencies are concerned with the vitality of the local church, they will encourage their participation in associational colloquy, for therein the local congregation can develop independent strength. Reliance on denominational provision alone makes the local church more dependent; weaker, not healthier." (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p. 118.)

**Insight 96:** "The strong church is the indigenous church. Such churches are developed from within by the achievement of their own order, not from without by the addition of 'standard methods.' The local Baptist church will grow strong as it engages with other Baptist churches in colloquy. The promotion of programs essentially proliferates structure. As an ecclesiological expression the association concerns life and, therefore, must maintain a vital objective. The source of a vital relationship is colloquy." (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p. 118.)

**Insight 97:** "The association is not a society to serve the churches but a fellowship through which the churches, in the spirit of Christ, serve one another. The fellowship mutual concern among neighboring congregations of life faith and order is an essential expression, not as cause but as consequence of the intention of Jesus." (F. Russell Bennett, Jr., *The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: A Socio-Theological Study of the Baptist Association*. Atlanta, Home Mission Board, 1974, p. 138.)