

## THE ABEL MORGANS'S CONTRIBUTION TO BAPTIST ECCLESIOLOGY IN COLONIAL AMERICA

by  
Gerald L. Priest<sup>1</sup>

In chapter seven of Leon McBeth's *Baptist Heritage*, titled "Revival Fires: Baptists in America," he identifies the eighteenth century as a turning point for Baptists. Small beginnings gave way to a surge of growth. He attributes this to three factors: waves of revivalism beginning with the Great Awakening, a social setting that gave status to Dissenters, and immigration of English and Welsh Baptists to America.<sup>2</sup> One may argue for additional contributions to Baptist success, such as the missionary activity of pioneer preachers and the nearly wholesale support by Baptists for the American War of Independence. But all of these factors could be discussed as part of the overall contribution of the Welsh Baptists in colonial America. Beginning with their settlements of the Welsh Tract (Delaware) and Welsh Neck (South Carolina) these lovers of political and spiritual freedom spread numerically and provided necessary leadership for a fledgling denomination in crucial areas of Baptist work, such as church planting and ministerial education.

Perhaps the most significant legacy of the Welsh Baptists can be found in areas of local church ministry: congregational singing, fervent expositional preaching, Reformed doctrine, itinerant evangelism, and especially their organizational skills as reflected in the first and most influential of all Baptist associations in America—the Philadelphia Baptist Association (1707).<sup>3</sup> Among the pastoral membership of this body, two men stand out as representing the best in Welsh Baptist ecclesiology.<sup>4</sup> The relationship they bore to each other (uncle and

---

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Priest is Professor of Historical Theology at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary in Allen Park, MI.

<sup>2</sup>Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), p. 200.

<sup>3</sup>The Philadelphia Baptist Association will hereafter be abbreviated to PBA.

<sup>4</sup>For many Welsh Baptists "ecclesiology was not an optional extra but intrinsic to the nature of the Gospel itself" (D. Densil Morgan, "John Myles [1621–83] and the Future of Ilston's Past: Welsh Baptists After Three and a Half Centuries," *Baptist*

nephew) is secondary to the impact they had on their fellow Baptists during a time of intense struggle for denominational recognition and growth.

#### ABEL MORGAN SR.

Abel Morgan Sr. (1673<sup>5</sup>–1722), Welsh Baptist preacher and uncle of Regular Baptist pastor Abel Morgan Jr., was born at Alltgoch in Cardigan County, South Wales. After conversion and ordination at age nineteen, Morgan ministered for several years at the Baptist church of Blaene Gwent in Monmouthshire.<sup>6</sup> When his brother Enoch Morgan immigrated to America in 1701 to become pastor of the Welsh Tract Church, he induced Abel and others to follow him. Because of his good reputation, verified by several acquaintances in Pennsylvania, Abel Morgan received a call in 1709 from the Baptist church at Pennepek near Philadelphia to be their pastor.<sup>7</sup> Morgan agreed to come after securing the approval of his local congregation.

The Morgan brothers were successors to the great seventeenth century pioneer preachers of Wales, John Miles, Vavasor Powell, Jenkin Jones, and Thomas Evans—all Calvinist in theology and Puritan in sentiment.<sup>8</sup> The Morgans's transferral from Wales was part of a

---

*Quarterly* 38 [October 1999]: 178).

<sup>5</sup>Some records give the date of 1637 as the year of Morgan's birth, but Jonathan Davis correctly disputes it, doubting that he could have been born in that year if his brother Enoch was born in 1676 and his half brother Benjamin Griffith, in 1688 (*History of the Welsh Baptists, From the Year Sixty-Three to the Year One Thousand Seven Hundred and Seventy* [reprint of 1835 ed., Gallatin, TN: Church History Research and Archives, 1982], p. 70).

<sup>6</sup>The mother church of Blaene Gwent was Rhydwylym, formed in 1668 under the leadership of William Jones. Rhydwylym strongly influenced Welsh Baptists in the practice of close communion "being supported without exception by the controversial rite of laying on of hands" (Ben G. Owens, "Rhydwylym Church 1668–89: A Study of West Wales Baptists," in *Welsh Baptist Studies*, ed. Mansel John [Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1976], p. 97).

<sup>7</sup>Morgan was the sixth pastor of the church. Those preceding him were Elias Keach, John Watts, Evan Morgan, Samuel Jones, and Joseph Wood. Keach, Watts, and Wood were Englishmen; Morgan and Jones were Welshmen.

<sup>8</sup>"The prevailing tradition among mainstream Welsh Baptists for two and a half centuries was Calvinism. The 1689 [Second London Particular Baptist] *Confession of Faith*, which was loyal to the doctrinal emphases of the 1644 London *Confession*, remained normative for the churches throughout the eighteenth century" (Morgan, "John Myles," p. 182). For example, the Rhydwylym Association of Baptist Churches emphasized the need to read the Second London Confession "from the beginning to end at least twice every year and every church was expected in its letter to the Association to certify its acceptance of it" (T. M. Bassett, *The Welsh Baptists* [Swansea: Ilston

larger contingency of immigrants who were promised a large tract of land in William Penn's commonwealth. The promise never materialized, but Welshmen nevertheless were active in the early history of Pennsylvania. With the coming of immigrants from Rhydwlwm in 1701, Welsh families flowed into eastern Pennsylvania and into the Great Valley of the Delaware region where clusters of Welsh communities sprang up. Welsh adventurers could be found everywhere along the eastern seaboard by the end of the colonial period. But the Calvinistic Baptists, coming as congregations from South Wales, settled mainly in the Welsh Tract and Pencader areas of Delaware. From these nuclei, the Welsh Baptists grew considerably in numbers and influence, extending settlements into the Carolinas, particularly Welsh Neck, South Carolina. Welsh-born and Welsh American Baptist ministers provided a dependable and continuous supply to the churches in these areas, and were prominent in the leadership and growth of the Regular Baptist denomination in the New World.<sup>9</sup> McBeth writes that "the Welsh provided not only members and ministers for the Baptist churches in this country but also shaped their spirit, doctrines, worship patterns, and organizational practices."<sup>10</sup> Abel Morgan was an early and vital contributor of these elements to Regular Baptist ecclesiology in America.

On the final day of Abel Morgan's ministry at Blaene Gwent, the church had a special meeting during which he proposed several resolutions unanimously agreed upon. In parting with his sorrowing congregation, Morgan issued a three-fold charge to them:

1. That they should never grieve their ministers, who should labor among them in word and doctrine, but cheerfully to assist them in temporal things, as well as in any difficulty which might occur in the exercise of discipline, or the important work of the ministry.
2. That they should love one another. Not forsaking the assembling of themselves together, as the manner of some is; but to exhort one another to stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.

---

House, 1977], p. 69; cf. p. 89). One reason for the prevalence of Puritanism among these Baptists was that Anglican Dissenters were supplying the populace with Welsh translations of Puritan works (D. Densil Morgan, "Smoke Fire and Light: Baptists and the Revitalization of Welsh Dissent," *Baptist Quarterly* 32 [January 1988]: 226).

<sup>9</sup>Gwyn A. Williams, *The Search for Beulah Land: The Welsh and the Atlantic Revolution* (New York: Holmes & Meir Publishers, 1980), pp. 20–21.

<sup>10</sup>McBeth, *Baptist Heritage*, p. 211.

3. That they should encourage all who might have any promising gifts for the ministry.<sup>11</sup>

These three challenges to a local church appear to be the building blocks of Welsh ecclesiology in colonial America: (1) ministerial support, (2) loving exhortation to faithfulness, and (3) encouragement of Welshmen to consider God's call to ministry. These were the emphases of Abel Morgan's own ministry.

The travel-weary Morgan arrived in Philadelphia on February 14, 1712, after having lost his wife and son during the arduous eleven-week storm-tossed voyage.<sup>12</sup> Added to this tragedy was the "distracted" Pennepek church he found upon arrival. Two Baptist ministers in the area were evidently arguing over who should serve as interim at Pennepek. When another was appointed to the task, one of the disputing ministers refused to leave. Morgan therefore "gave himself to be a member" rather than the pastor of this church until the problem could be resolved by a committee appointed by the PBA. The committee decidedly chose Morgan, and the disputant left in disgrace.<sup>13</sup>

The Pennepek Church, the oldest surviving Baptist church in Pennsylvania, was founded near Philadelphia in 1688 by Elias Keach, son of the famous London Particular Baptist Benjamin Keach.<sup>14</sup> Because the membership was scattered over a large area, including Trenton, Chester, and other small towns in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, they met collectively only twice a year.<sup>15</sup> The circumstance of widely scattered meeting places with a bond to one central church was derived from the plan of John Miles and the several churches he founded in South Wales beginning in 1649. Following something of a presbyterian system, Miles had linked these churches together in an association centered in Ilston.<sup>16</sup> Eventually, the Pennepek church produced

---

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Davis, *History of the Welsh Baptists*, p. 69.

<sup>12</sup>Minutes of the Pennepek Church, ABHS, 56, cited in Davies, *Transatlantic Brethren, Rev. Samuel Jones (1735–1814) and His Friends: Baptist in Wales, Pennsylvania, and Beyond* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1995), p. 63. See also Davis, *History of the Welsh Baptists*, pp. 68–69. Altogether, Morgan's voyage took twenty-two weeks, because of having to find harbor twice due to bad weather. During the course of his life, Abel Morgan would marry three times and produce a total of five children.

<sup>13</sup>Davies, *Transatlantic Brethren*, pp. 63–64.

<sup>14</sup>This church is also referred to in various places as the Lower Dublin Church.

<sup>15</sup>Record Book of the Pennepek Church cited by Horatio Gates Jones in *Historical Sketch of the Lower Dublin (or Pennepek) Baptist Church* (Morrisania, NY, n.p., 1869), p. 7. See also Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1963), p. 210.

<sup>16</sup>See Bassett, *Welsh Baptists* p. 54; McBeth, *Baptist Heritage*, p. 317, and Densil

daughter congregations at Middletown (1688), Piscataway (1689), Philadelphia (1698),<sup>17</sup> and Cohansey (1690). These churches were the nucleus of the PBA. A fifth congregation included in the founding of the Association was the Welsh Tract Church.<sup>18</sup> This group of sixteen had emigrated from Pembrokeshire, South Wales in 1701,<sup>19</sup> and for a time fellowshipped with the Pennepek (Lower Dublin) congregation. However, because Pennepek did not require the laying of hands upon newly baptized converts, the Welsh group left in 1703 to settle a large tract of land near New Castle, on the Delaware River, which they called *Rhandir y Cymrn*, commonly known as Welsh Tract.<sup>20</sup> Laying on hands was a practice that many Baptists from Wales strictly adhered

---

Morgan, "John Myles," p. 177, where he writes, "The principal characteristic of the Ilston church and of Myles' mission...was their exclusive, corporate and inter-congregational nature." The remainder of Morgan's article cites examples of this phenomenon. However, the fact that Abel Morgan obtained *permission* from his local church for a ministry in America is only one instance of a jealous guarding of local autonomy. Interestingly, the Welsh Baptists insisted on preservation of local church government when threatened by hierarchicalism in the PBA. Time and again, member pastors delineated the PBA as an advisory, not a judicial, body for its representative churches. For several examples of this, see James L. Clark, "To Set Them In Order": *Some Influences of the Philadelphia Association Upon Baptists of America to 1814* (reprint ed.; Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2001), pp. 119–40. Terms such as "appeal" and "power" gave way to "advice" and "mutual agreement" in handling local church issues brought before the PBA.

<sup>17</sup>Although the First Church of Philadelphia had been organized in 1698, its membership was connected with the Pennepek Church until 1746, when it became independent. Hence, the Pennepek and Philadelphia congregations were considered *one* of the founding churches of the Philadelphia Association.

<sup>18</sup>Francis W. Sacks reminds us that "with the exception of Elias Keach and Thomas Killingsworth, the most influential ministers [of the Philadelphia area Baptist churches] were all Welshmen, or descendants of the church at Welsh Tract... What is significant...is that all had experienced Particular Baptist connectionalism in England [via Wales]," and all were "firmly established in a Calvinistic direction" (*The Philadelphia Baptist Tradition of Church and Church Authority: An Ecumenical Analysis and Theological Interpretation* [Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989], p. 142).

<sup>19</sup>Welsh Baptist historian Joshua Thomas states that, although members of this early contingency were wishing to emigrate from various Baptist churches in Wales, they were appropriately reconstituted as a new church since they were coming to America under the leadership of an ordained minister, Enoch Morgan. "Being thus formed into a church, they [their respective churches] gave them a letter of recommendation for their reception as brethren, should they meet any of the same faith, order, and practice" (*The American Baptist Heritage in Wales* [Lafayette, TN: Church History Research and Archives Affiliation, 1976], p. 2). By and large, this "new church" became the Welsh Tract congregation which eventually settled in Delaware. For a brief description of the beginnings of Welsh Tract, see *ibid.*, pp. 106–8.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

to.<sup>21</sup> Morgan Edwards writes that the

Welsh Tract Church was the principal if not sole means of introducing singing, imposition of hands, ruling elders, and church covenants into the Middle States.... Singing psalms met with some opposition, especially at Cohansey; but laying on of hands on baptized believers, as such, gained acceptance with more difficulty, as appears by the following narrative translated from the church book: "But we could not be in fellowship (at the Lord's table) with our brethren of Pennepek and Philadelphia, because they did not hold to the laying on of hands: true; some of them believed in the ordinance, but neither preached it up nor practised it; and when we moved to Welsh Tract and left 22 of our members at Pennepek, and took some of their [members] with us, the difficulty increased."<sup>22</sup>

A meeting took place at the house of Richard Miles in Radnor, Chester County, on July 22, 1706, to mend differences and achieve union in the "good ways of the Lord." The meeting resulted in a decision that members of the churches could share "transient or occasional communion" but the Welsh Tract Church resolved still not to accept into their membership those who had not received the laying on of hands.<sup>23</sup> The difficulty was finally resolved in 1709, after a series of meetings, resulting in "the brethren [holding] sweet communion together."<sup>24</sup> Charity on the matter prevailed and the ordinance eventually lost favor among most Baptists. Horatio G. Jones wrote that the Lower Dublin Church "grew indifferent on the subject.... Gradually, and after a free conference, the churches of Pennsylvania and Delaware agreed that the

---

<sup>21</sup>According to Bassett, the practice of laying on of hands at baptism originated with the General Baptists. It is not true that *all* Welsh Baptists practiced this ordinance. In fact, laying on of hands had caused a major split among their churches in Wales as early as 1655 (*Welsh Baptists*, pp. 31–32, 46, 74–75). For a further discussion of the origin and practice of laying hands, see Ernest A. Payne, "Baptists and the Laying on of Hands," *Baptist Quarterly* 15 (January 1954): 203–15. On the basis of Acts 8:17, 19:6, and Hebrews 6:1–2, Benjamin Keach (General turned Particular Baptist) insisted on the rite in his treatise, *The Laying on of Hands as such proved to be an ordinance of Christ* (1678). Keach saw in the rite no impartation of charismatic gifts, but a "further increase" of the Holy Spirit for assurance of salvation and appears to link the rite with the sealing of the Spirit in Eph 1:13. Keach's view reinforced the practice of it among Welsh Baptists. See J. K. Parratt, "An Early Baptist on the Laying on of Hands," *Baptist Quarterly* 21 (July 1966): 325–27, 320.

<sup>22</sup>Morgan Edwards, *Materials Towards a History of The Baptists*, 2 vols. (reprint ed., Danielsville, GA: Heritage Papers, 1984), 2:6.

<sup>23</sup>From the Welsh Tract Baptist Church Book, cited in Davies, *Transatlantic Brethren*, p. 53.

<sup>24</sup>Edwards, *Materials*, 2:6.

practice or disuse of the ordinance should not be a bar to Communion."<sup>25</sup>

Another reason that the Welsh Tract Church desired independence is that it preferred preaching and conversing in the native language rather than English, the common speech of the Pennepek Church. To facilitate the ministry of his people, Abel Morgan translated the so-called Century Confession into Welsh. This was essentially the Second London Confession of Faith of 1689 with the addition of "an article relative to Laying on of hands; Singing Psalms; and Church Covenants."<sup>26</sup> Evidently this was the confession that members of the PBA quarterly meeting signed on May 4, 1716, although at the time it did not become that body's official statement of faith.<sup>27</sup> Due to the influence of the Welsh Baptist insistence of the laying on of hands and Benjamin Keach's affirmation of the practice in his church's amended version of the London Confession, the PBA included this in its Confession of 1742, along with an article approving the singing of Psalms.<sup>28</sup> Added to the Philadelphia Confession was a short treatise on church discipline, based partially on a manuscript written by Abel Morgan. This, again, reveals the strong influence of Welsh practice upon middle colonial Baptists in America. The Welsh Baptist emphasis on proper behavior in the local church meant a dignified worship of singing and administration of *all* the ordinances, which for them, included not only the laying on of hands, but anointing the sick with oil. While most Baptists do not currently practice either of these rites as ordinances in the local church, many early Baptists did so with great attachment.

One way of attempting to perpetuate Welsh traditions in the local churches of the middle colonies was inbreeding of their ministers. That is, a minister was the product of a local church, rather than an import from another congregation. All of the Welsh ministers were brothers in a spiritual sense, but to further guarantee a perpetuation of Welsh ministry, actual family members would succeed one another in the pastorate. Sons followed fathers, nephews followed uncles, so that a name as well as a set of old world values would preserve a sense of social identity, familial security, and doctrinal cohesion to congregations

---

<sup>25</sup>Cited in David Spencer, *The Early Baptists of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: William Syckelmoore, 1877), pp. 40–41.

<sup>26</sup>From the Welsh Tract Church Book, cited in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969) p. 349.

<sup>27</sup>Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, p. 349.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. 349–52.

who were constantly pressured to conform to the increasingly pluralistic culture of colonial America. What Davies said of the Welsh Tract Church could be applied to other Welsh Baptist churches generally: its character was indebted to its origins.<sup>29</sup> Of course, facilitating this sense of unity was the fact that often the community in which the church resided was decidedly Welsh and thus Welsh-speaking. Therefore, Anglican clergyman Thomas Jenkins (himself a Welshman) thought he could reclaim “dissenting” Welsh Baptists to an English church by preaching to them in their own tongue, but the Baptist tie was stronger.<sup>30</sup>

A second way of extending Welsh Baptist traditions was by evangelistic outreach. Welsh-born colonial preachers did not confine their ministry to their own local churches, but itinerated throughout the valleys of Delaware, eastern Pennsylvania, and the Jerseys. As such, they were promoters of regularity and prime movers in the PBA.<sup>31</sup> There was no more successful minister at doing this than Abel Morgan, a man already well known in Baptist circles in Wales and from a family of Baptists actively engaged in evangelism. After assuming the pastorate of Pennepek, Morgan took a major role in helping to organize and promote Baptist works. He led in establishing a congregation at Cape May, New Jersey, and preached regularly at Hopewell and Montgomery in Pennsylvania. In providing ministry to sister churches near Philadelphia, Morgan not only preached faithfully the Word of God, but promoted the Welsh Baptist beliefs and customs.<sup>32</sup> He was anxious about “the English swallowing up their [Welsh] language,” and did what he could to preserve it, believing that in doing so, he would also be conserving a purer Protestant heritage. Many of his teachings were drawn from a confession referred to as the Welsh Rhydwylym statement of faith that was based on the 1689 London Confession. Shortly after coming to America, Morgan drafted a similar confession for the Welsh Tract Church, which all the members signed. An English translation of this confession was the basis for the famous Philadelphia Confession of 1742. Morgan made a translation of the Westminster Shorter Catechism with the admonition that family catechizing include teaching the children Welsh.<sup>33</sup> He also produced a Bible concordance in Welsh, published posthumously by his brother

---

<sup>29</sup>Davies, *Transatlantic Brethren*, p. 55

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., pp. 69–70.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>33</sup>Bassett, *The Welsh Baptists* p. 82.

Enoch, “for distribution among his [Abel’s] beloved countrymen, according to *his* design, and for *their* benefit.”<sup>34</sup> In introducing the book, Enoch paid high tribute to his brother by referring to his godly example “of a devoted, pious life, not in the pulpit alone, but in a chaste and holy conversation, so that he could declare with Paul—‘I am pure from the blood of all men.’”<sup>35</sup>

In time, as Welsh-speaking “branch” churches became independent congregations, the language was displaced by English, since growing memberships became “Americanized” and consequently illiterate in the Old World language. By the mid-eighteenth century, Baptist affiliation was no longer associated with ethnic origin or identity. Yet even with the supplanting of the Welsh language by the English, Welsh Baptist customs persisted by means of confession and covenant. Abel Morgan’s insistence on church discipline and order, as expressed in the Philadelphia Confession, gave to Baptist congregations a strong foundation upon which to build and behave.

When one considers the fact that most of the early Baptist ministers of the PBA were Welsh, it is understandable that the influence of Welsh custom and theology on Baptists in America would be extensive. Their insistence on the continual use of versions of the 1689 London Confession, culminating in the amended adoption of it as their own statement of faith in 1742, is just one example of this influence. Henry Vedder states that the Association’s “adoption of a strongly Calvinistic Confession...was a turning-point in the history of American Baptists, as it ensured the prevalence of that type of theology.... It was the Philadelphia Association that turned the tide [from Arminianism], and decided the course of American Baptist history.”<sup>36</sup> Abel Morgan’s role in this contribution was no small matter, since by means of his pastoral leadership, itinerant evangelism, doctrinal instruction of Association churches, and production of Calvinistic confessional literature, he helped to maintain an interest in Reformed theology that the Philadelphia Confession expressed.

---

<sup>34</sup>From the Dedicatory Letter, cited in William Sprague, *Annals of the American Baptist Pulpit or Commemorative Notices of Distinguished Clergymen of the Baptist Denomination in the United States, From the Early Settlement of the Country to the Close of the Year Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-Five* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1860), p. 33. The Welsh title of the concordance is *Cydgordiad Egwyddorawl*.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>*A Short History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1907), p. 306. See also, Vedder’s *History of the Baptists in the Middle States* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1898), p. 93, where he writes, “The Baptists who came from Wales really determined the character of the Baptist denomination in America, and finally overcame the strong Arminian influence of New England.”

Not many Welsh-born Baptist ministers were formally educated. Higher educational opportunities were simply not available to them. Some, like Morgan Edwards, were able to attend the Trosnant Academy near Pontyroom (1732), and then advance to the “dissenting school” located at Bristol, England (1679).<sup>37</sup> Most ministers, like Abel Morgan, were self-taught in the scriptures or were tutored by another pastor. However, their lack of opportunity did not diminish their zeal for schooling others. Morgan, for example, had a great interest in educating young men for the ministry, which the PBA minutes for 1722 bear record. Member churches were instructed to make inquiry among themselves as to young persons “hopeful for the ministry, and inclinable for learning; and if they have, to give notice of it to Mr. Abel Morgan...that he might recommend to the acadamy [*sic*] on Mr. Hollis, his account.”<sup>38</sup> The Mr. Hollis referred to is Thomas Hollis, a wealthy London merchant and Baptist who benefited Harvard by endowing its chair of divinity.<sup>39</sup> This interest did not bear any tangible fruit until 1756, when Regular Baptist Isaac Eaton established the first Baptist academy in America at Hopewell, New Jersey.

Current Baptists should not neglect the legacy of Welsh Regular Baptists like Abel Morgan Sr. He was a faithful minister of the Word, and an ardent proponent of a theology that is Bible-based and God-honoring. His concern to evangelize, plant churches, raise up an educated ministry, and extend the traditions of his Welsh Baptist heritage provide us an example of perseverance in godliness and sincere devotion to the faith of his fathers.

#### ABEL MORGAN JR.

Regular Baptist pastor Abel Morgan Jr. (1713–1785) was born at Welsh Tract, Delaware and educated in a small academy run by Presbyterian minister Thomas Evans. Morgan came from a noble stock of Welsh Baptist preachers. His grandfather was Morgan Rydarch, a famous Baptist minister in Wales. As we have noted, his uncle, Abel Morgan Sr., pastored churches both in Wales and Philadelphia. It was

---

<sup>37</sup>Thomas R. McKibbens, Jr. and Kenneth L. Smith, *The Life and Works of Morgan Edwards* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), pp. 4–9.

<sup>38</sup>A. D. Gillette, ed., *Minutes of the Philadelphia Association from A.D. 1707 to A.D. 1807; Being the First One Hundred Years of Its Existence* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851), p. 27.

<sup>39</sup>For further information on Hollis and his bequests to Harvard, see David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America, and Other Parts of the World*, 2 vols. (Boston: Lincoln & Edmands, 1813), 1:402, and Josiah Quincy, *The History of Harvard University*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1840), 1:ch 12.

Abel's father, Enoch Morgan, who served as pastor of the Welsh Tract Baptist Church beginning in 1730. Under his father's ministry Abel Morgan was ordained in 1734. Welsh Baptists were known for their orthodox theology and strict view of morals coupled with their zealous faith and fervent preaching. These qualities were abundantly reflected in the life and character of Abel Morgan. Dedicated foremost to the ministry and then to the care of his mother, Morgan remained a bachelor throughout his life.

Middletown Baptist Church called Morgan to be their pastor in 1738. Middletown was the oldest Baptist church in New Jersey (founded in 1688)<sup>40</sup> and one of the first of five churches to join the PBA. By the end of the colonial era, Middletown had given birth to at least four other congregations in central New Jersey: Hopewell, Hightstown, Crosswicks, and Jacobstown. During the early years of his pastorate, Morgan seemed content to maintain a normal ministry of the Word evidently without any sense of true conversion. But in January 1740, as a result of George Whitefield's preaching during the Great Awakening, he experienced a profound sense of personal assurance of salvation. In a sermon titled "The Soul's Solace," based on John 14:21, he related to his congregation the remarkable change that had occurred in his life.<sup>41</sup> Morgan reflected on the scriptural words, "I will manifest myself to him."

Sometime past when I was in great distress and concern about my soul, having been for years together sensible that I wanted something, but could not well tell what, or what I would be at; then at one time, as I was alone on a certain evening meditating on my miserable case, and especially on my impotency and inability to come to Christ, these words in the eleventh of Matthew were impressed on my mind, viz., "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden"...to which I replied, "I can't come; Lord thou knowest I can't come." It seems I had no sooner said this in mine heart, but these words, ("I will manifest myself unto him") came flowing and pouring in upon me, which made me wonder! Upon which I got up directly and lighted a candle in order to look at them and read them. Oh, how they appeared unto me: "I will manifest myself to him." Then thought I, this is all I wanted! Oh this is all; I was so filled with the promise, which so filled my soul with joy, that I could hardly tell whether it was the promise, or the accomplishment of the promise I

---

<sup>40</sup>In 1955, the congregation voted to become a community church with an interdenominational orientation. By 1963, the membership was sufficiently diverse to warrant a name change to simply Old First Church, dually aligning itself with both the American Baptist Convention and the United Church of Christ.

<sup>41</sup>Norman Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1964), p. 51.

then had. Methought I saw here was all. Oh, I could see as it were the righteousness of Christ. Why if he would manifest himself to me I should surely see him, as my Righteousness. I saw there, that in this promise there was the Father, the Holy Ghost, and all. Oh this thing was wonderful to me. I wondered at such a thing: that Christ should manifest himself unto me. Oh how this word (Himself) appeared to me. How this (Himself) would run in my mind. In brief every word was capital words. Oh how great!... Well a little after I thought if Christ should manifest himself to me, I should sin, and presently lose it again; whereupon these words came in: “We will come unto him, and make our abode with him” and stopt that objection. Oh these two sentences: “I will manifest myself unto him,” and “make our abode with him” answered all objections, and were as two wings to my soul. Glory, glory, glory to God for it; may these be fulfilled unto me in his time. Amen, Amen. Oh even so, Amen! This was on ye evening of 24th day of January, 1739–40.<sup>42</sup>

What had crystallized in his mind as a result of this experience were the biblical doctrines of total inability, salvation by grace alone, divine imputation of Christ’s righteousness, and eternal security—doctrines that would remain prominent themes of his ministry throughout the remainder of his life.

The old church record book of Middletown describes Morgan as “an example of examples,” both in his public ministry and his private life. In his quaint springless buggy, on horseback, or on foot he traversed New Jersey and regions beyond. According to his diary, he traveled to over forty different places throughout the state, including Free Hold, Long Branch, Englishtown, Bordentown, Cheesequakes, Crosswicks, Shrewsbury, Cohansey, and Cape May. He frequently preached the gospel in New York, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. In doing so, he laid the foundations in many communities for doctrinally strong Baptist churches.<sup>43</sup> While there do not appear to be any spectacular revivals during his ministry, there were significant additions made to the churches under his preaching. He himself baptized more than three hundred persons during his forty-seven year ministry, and he preached approximately five thousand sermons.<sup>44</sup> His lasting influence on the local church and the entire denomination is reflected in the comment of Dr. Wheelock Parmly: “He was one of the strong men of his day; preeminently prepared for the arduous pioneer work, which in the

---

<sup>42</sup>Cited in E. J. Foote, “A Sketch of the Life of Rev. Abel Morgan,” in *History of Monmouth County, New Jersey*, ed. Franklin Ellis Foote (Trenton: Trenton Baptist Association of New Jersey, 1883), pp. 45–46.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>44</sup>Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey*, p. 52.

early history of the country he was called to perform. He laid broad and deep the foundation of truth, and to the labors of such men are to be attributed, under God, the prosperity and success which, as a denomination, we are permitted to enjoy."<sup>45</sup>

During the American Revolution, many churches were misused in some way by the British soldiers. From Morgan's Middletown church they removed all the pews and evidently converted the place into a hospital. This did not stop Morgan from preaching, however. He wrote in his diary, "Preached in mine own barn, [and] was the means of converting and edifying many more." When the Battle of Monmouth took place on Sunday, June 28, 1778, Morgan recorded, "At Middletown the very day that the English army came into the neighborhood...[I] preached on Psalm 62:8, 'Trust in Him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before Him: God is a refuge for us.'"<sup>46</sup> His sermon manuscripts, neatly written, show careful preparation, sound doctrine, and practical application. His method of preaching was expository rather than topical, yet he would call up various passages of the Bible to elucidate his text. Numerous quotations of Scripture follow almost every statement in his sermons. In his message before the PBA for October 13, 1761, the notes of which cover three pages in fine hand, there are fifty-five Scripture references.

Another Welsh Particular Baptist, Morgan Edwards, writes of him: "Mr. Morgan was a man of sound learning and solid judgment; he has given specimens of both in his public disputes and publications on the subject of baptism."<sup>47</sup> Among those he debated were Presbyterian ministers Samuel Harker, and Samuel Finley, later president of the College of New Jersey. The debate with Finley took place in 1743 at Cape May, New Jersey in connection with a revival taking place there. It seems that those being converted were joining the Baptists via immersion over the objections of local Presbyterians. The principal issue was believer's versus infant baptism. After the debate, which both sides claimed to have won, Finley gathered his arguments for pedobaptism together in a treatise titled, *A Charitable Plea for the Speechless* to which Morgan responded with *Anti-Pedo Rantism, or Mr. Samuel Finley's Charitable Plea for the Speechless Examined and Refuted, the*

---

<sup>45</sup>Excerpted from "Old First Church Inquirer's Handbook," n.d., p. 8. Parmlly, originally from the South, became pastor of the First Baptist Church of Jersey City in 1854, and was active in the American Baptist Home Mission Society (William Cathcart, ed. *The Baptist Encyclopedia*, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1883], 2:885).

<sup>46</sup>Foote, "Sketch," p. 36.

<sup>47</sup>Edwards, *Materials*, 1:82.

*Baptism of Believers Maintained, and the Mode of It by Immersion Vindicated*. Morgan argued that no support for infant baptism could be found in the Bible or in the early history of the church, and that there were positive evidences in both of these sources for believer's baptism. As to immersion, Morgan appealed to proof-texts, word derivations, and theological deductions.<sup>48</sup> Observing Morgan's adept skill in arguing from the Scriptures, Edwards characterized Morgan as not a "custom-divine," nor a "leading string-divine,"<sup>49</sup> but a "bible-divine."<sup>50</sup>

If a man's library is any reflection of his knowledge and character, then it could be said of Abel Morgan that he was preeminent in both. His books reflect a wide range and depth of learning. Most of the works were by the Puritans, such as John Bunyan, John Flavel, Thomas Goodman, Isaac Ambrose, and Jonathan Edwards. Morgan was familiar with Latin and the biblical languages as evidenced by the inclusion of several grammars, a well-worn Hebrew Old Testament, a Greek New Testament, a Greek-Latin Parallel Bible, and Cicero's *De Philosophia* of 1,300 pages. John Calvin's writings occupied a prominent place among his collection as well as in his theology. Morgan possessed the *Works of John Calvin*, a ponderous tome of over 2,200 pages, written in Latin. There was also a separate volume of Calvin's *Institutes*, bearing evidence of careful study with finely written notes in the margins, all in Latin.<sup>51</sup> Among his other theological resources were William Ames' *Medulla Theologicae*, Philip Limborch's *Theologia Christiana*, and Benjamin Keach's *Gospel Mysteries Unveiled*. Probably one of Morgan's most treasured books was one presented to him by its author: *The Doctrines of Glorious Grace Unfolded, Defended and Practically Improved* by Isaac Chanler (or Chandler).<sup>52</sup> Additionally, there were commentaries, two volumes on the church fathers, Bible

---

<sup>48</sup>Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey*, pp. 60–61.

<sup>49</sup>"Leading strings" were ribbons attached to children's clothing to serve as a harness or leash. What Edwards means to say is that in his preaching Morgan was not controlled by tradition nor other men, but by the Word of God.

<sup>50</sup>Edwards, *Materials*, 1:83. John Rippon reported that upon reading the debate between Finley and Morgan, Rachel Furman, a Presbyterian, "received impressions respecting the sentiments of the Baptists, with whom she at that time had no personal acquaintance." Evidently these "impressions" convinced her into becoming a Baptist. Her son Richard Furman later became a national leader among the Baptists (*Annual Register*, 2:282–83, cited in Clark, "To Set Them in Order," p. 64).

<sup>51</sup>Maring, *Baptists in New Jersey*, p. 70.

<sup>52</sup>Cathcart, *Baptist Encyclopedia*, 1:20. Chanler was known for his uncompromising Calvinism. As an equally strong advocate of the Great Awakening, he invited George Whitefield to preach for him at his pastorate, the Ashley River (South Carolina) Baptist Church; cf. McBeth, *Baptist Heritage*, p. 218.

reference works, books of sermons by great divines like Jeremy Taylor, Bible histories, and philosophical treatises. E. J. Foote writes that Morgan's library "is seen to be of a solid character, a working library for a working minister of the Gospel."<sup>53</sup>

Abel Morgan was a Particular (Regular) Baptist, which meant that he was thoroughly Reformed in his soteriology. This fact is born out in his sermons, letters, and diary notes. Preeminent in all of his writings is the doctrine of God's sovereignty and its practical effect on the soul. In summarizing a sermon he preached in 1743 on Genesis 2:16–17, Morgan wrote,

Let us consider God's sovereignty: 1. He is sovereign over all things; His dominion is universal.... 2. over Angels: good and evil. 3. over all inanimate and irrational things: Job 38.35. 4. over man as here. Hence it will plainly appear and natively follow that He had an undoubted right to give Laws to His creatures.... Learn to judge sin not by its greatness or smallness of the action, but by the authority and command of the Law-giver. God grant that I may be so affected at the sight of Him, as to sorrow after a godly sort. Amen.<sup>54</sup>

Highly respected for his leadership, Abel Morgan was often called upon to preside over the PBA annual meeting and to offer, at various times, its circulatory sermons and letters. Foote wrote that "in this way...he did as much, probably, as any man of his day to mold and settle the mind of our Churches in the true doctrines of the Gospel."<sup>55</sup> His messages were always well-fitted to the occasion. Among the eight Welsh Baptist rites practiced by Abel Morgan was the anointing of the sick with oil, based on James 5:14–15. Foot-washing was another.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup>Foote, "Sketch," p. 45.

<sup>54</sup>From the archives of Old First Church, Middletown, New Jersey.

<sup>55</sup>Foote, "Sketch," p. 34.

<sup>56</sup>Edwards warmly remonstrates that the "eight christian rites stand on the same footing [as anointing the sick with oil, making nine rites altogether]. No argument can be urged for laying aside some but will operate towards laying aside all.... To pick and choose are not fair.... O custom, cruel custom, tyrant custom. When wilt thou cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?" (*Materials*, 1:83–84). Edwards held to the same nine rites practiced not only by many Welsh Baptists but also by the Separate Baptists: baptism, the Lord's Supper, the love feast, laying on of hands, foot-washing, anointing the sick with oil, the right hand of fellowship, the kiss of charity, and dedication of children. For a discussion of Edwards's view of these rites, see McKibbens and Smith, *Life and Works of Morgan Edwards*, pp. 84–90. In his *Customs of the Primitive Churches* (Philadelphia: Andrew Steuart, 1768), Edwards mentions thirteen rites, omitting the right hand of fellowship and adding collections for the saints, fasts, public thanksgivings, funerals, and marriages (pp. 79–96). Since the shorter list appeared in his *Materials* some years after the *Customs*, one may conclude that Edwards had amended either

However, Morgan, along with other members of the PBA, hesitated in making these two practices a test of fellowship since there was not general agreement on them. When a divided Baptist church of Kingwood petitioned the Association for a decision on foot-washing, Morgan was appointed to give the official reply. He said that he could not give a firm answer because “the Association [members]...are not so happy as to be universally agreed themselves.” Therefore, he gave sound advice: “Endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Let not those who are bound in conscience to practice it [foot-washing], condemn those who are not convinced it is a duty,” and vice versa.<sup>57</sup> When it came to essential doctrine, however, Morgan and the other Association pastors gave no quarter. In 1773 they agreed that circular letters of their meetings would address articles of their Confession, in order to “caution the churches against innovation in doctrine and practice, and to watch against errors.”<sup>58</sup> Consequently, the Association appointed Morgan to draw up the 1774 circular letter addressing the foremost doctrine of the Regular Baptists—the absolute authority of the Bible; other confessional doctrines would be covered in subsequent yearly meetings. In his letter, Morgan affirmed that the best way to promote “unity in judgment” and “growth in every grace” among member churches is adherence to the doctrines of the faith as expressed in the Philadelphia Confession. The first of these is the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments. “These holy writings,” Morgan records, “are of God” and are “the infallible ground of faith and certain rule of obedience,...full and complete in all...parts, historical, doctrinal, and prophetic.” Morgan then reminds his readers of the great privilege to have “the Bible in your hands! Let this word of God dwell richly in your hearts also, in its doctrines, promises, commands, cautions, and threatenings; for your enlightening, your acting of every grace, your avoiding of every sin, and for your perfecting of holiness in the fear of God, 2 Cor. vii.1.... Beware ye, dear brethren, lest your adversary, the devil, render it useless to you, by your neglecting of it.”<sup>59</sup> Sage admonition from a godly preacher!

During the PBA’s October 1774 meeting, Rev. Samuel Jones treated the doctrine of the Trinity. At the very next fall meeting (October 10–12, 1775), the Association once again appointed Morgan to draft the doctrinal circular letter. This one dealt with chapter three in

---

his list or his practice, or both.

<sup>57</sup>*Minutes of the Philadelphia Association*, pp. 130–31.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 137.

the Philadelphia Confession—the doctrine of God's eternal decree. The explanation of such a difficult doctrine would necessitate great care and intelligence. Morgan was up to the challenge. He began by paraphrasing the doctrinal statement and affirming its necessity, continued with arguments against criticisms of it, and ended (as was his habit) with a direct practical commendation of the doctrine to distressed souls and a warning against licentiousness for those “confident” in their election. He wrote eloquently, “That God, the supreme, who is self-existent, and every way an independent sovereign, the creator of all things, hath an absolute right to dispose of all his creatures; and before his works of old, to appoint and determine all things to a certain end.” Morgan added that “this article of our belief, both scripture and reason do jointly and sufficiently confirm, Isa. xlvi. 10; Psalm xxxiii. 11; Prov. xix. 21.” He explained that in accomplishing his purpose of election, God does no violence to man's will; neither is God the author of sin, though he decreed to permit it. God chooses out of his free grace those predestined to salvation to the praise of his glory; the others are left to their final destruction to the glory of divine justice. Salvation and damnation, then, are clearly doxological. The elect need not be left in doubt as to their spiritual state, he enjoined. They should persevere and “faint not,” endeavoring “for satisfactory experience of grace in their own souls; that hereafter they may rejoice in this, and every other truth of God.”<sup>60</sup> Finally, Morgan warned those who think they are elect but lead dissolute lives by giving “themselves liberty to continue in sin.” He declared that no such wicked practices and black characters are compatible with the doctrines of grace. “Remember that holiness becometh the house and people of the Lord.”<sup>61</sup> Morgan wrote two more circular letters for the PBA: a challenge on fasting and prayer (October 1779) and an explanation of the sixth chapter of the Confession on the Fall of Man (October 1780). His accurate handling of the Word of God, his lucid comments, his dialectical skill, all serve to call attention to the gospel of God's matchless grace.

Abel Morgan must have endeared himself to his Baptist colleagues and congregation. There seems to have been a genuine reciprocal bond of love between people and pastor. The old records of the church state that toward the end of Morgan's life, “there should be a man hired at the expense of the said [Middletown] Church members, for one, two or three months, as the occasion may require, for the benefit and

---

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., pp. 150, 152.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., pp. 152–53.

service of the Rev. Abel Morgan, in his infirm and low state of body, and the expense of wages for the hire of said man so employed shall be levied on each member according to their estate.”<sup>62</sup> No doubt in gratitude for such sacrificial care, Morgan left to the church a bond valued at £150<sup>63</sup> and a well-used library of approximately three hundred books. Passing away on November 24, 1785, at Middletown at the age of 73, he was eulogized by his congregation: “His life was blameless, his ministry was powerful; he was a burning and shining light, and his memory is dear to the saints.” Dr. Samuel Jones, Welsh pastor of the Lower Dublin (Pennepek) Church, wrote that “a great man is fallen in our Israel. Very seldom indeed do the accomplishments and excellencies of body, mind, and grace, meet in so high a degree in one man.”<sup>64</sup> Buried in the local Presbyterian church cemetery (for lack of one at the Baptist church), Morgan’s remains were removed to the site of a monument erected in his honor during the Middletown church’s bicentennial in 1888. According to one newspaper account of the event, two hundred Baptist churches throughout New Jersey contributed to the cost of the memorial.<sup>65</sup> Such was the esteem Abel Morgan held in the hearts of the Baptists one hundred years after his death! A devout and humble man, Morgan relied on the sovereign grace of God in salvation and sanctification. He writes at the close of one of his sermon books: “God grant that I may be saved through that Christ whom I preach unto others. Amen, Oh, amen, amen. By Abel Morgan, a poor, unworthy minister of the gospel.”

### CONCLUSION

The Welsh Baptists, represented by Abel Morgan Sr. and Jr., brought many traditions with them from South Wales. The first generation of immigrants led by Enoch and Abel Morgan Sr. were jealous of those traditions they believed were part of the larger gospel message. Morgan Sr. sincerely but mistakenly believed that one way to safeguard doctrinal integrity in the New World was maintenance of the Old World (Welsh) language. He was fighting a losing battle in an increasingly pluralistic but *English* dominated society. One can nevertheless admire in such an effort the concern to maintain a coherent system of values that closely integrated Baptist beliefs. Ecclesiological

---

<sup>62</sup>Foote, “Sketch,” p. 40.

<sup>63</sup>This amount today would be valued at over \$18,500.

<sup>64</sup>Letter from Dr. S. Jones to Joshua Thomas, November 1785, cited in Thomas, *American Baptist Heritage in Wales*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>65</sup>Editorial in the *Middletown Independent* (September 29, 1993), p. 26.

practice was as important to the Welsh Baptists as their confessional expressions; the two were inseparable in their estimation. They reasoned, for example, that if baptism of believers is necessary to help insure the doctrinal purity of the local congregation, then so are the other ordained rites of the New Testament. Welsh pastors argued that Christ may not have explicitly mandated laying on of hands and anointing with oil, but they are implicitly sanctioned by their mention and usage in the New Testament. What drove them to these conclusions is that same hermeneutical principle that characterized Baptist ecclesiology from the very beginning—a literal interpretation of Scripture. Ironically, it was their devotion to an inspired Bible that led later Baptists to conclude that laying on hands was not an essential ordinance of the local church, at least not of the same significance as baptism and communion. To their enormous credit, Welsh Baptists came to the sensible conclusion that what could not be proven as essential to Christian doctrine should not be the cause of irreparable schism of Christian brethren.

Another derivative from the homeland was the strong associationism characteristic of Puritan Presbyterian and Congregational churches and adapted by the English and Welsh Particular Baptists as part of their own ecclesiastical polity.<sup>66</sup> Some of this, no doubt, was personality driven. John Miles, the founder of the Welsh Baptist denomination, was sent by the London Baptists as their “apostle” to plant churches in his native land. In taking his mission seriously he would not allow the slightest deviation from Baptist teaching as expressed in the 1644 London Baptist Confession. Naturally, other Welsh Baptist leaders followed suit: their “founding churches” established a centralized connectionalism of *daughter* churches; this practice carried over into America with the organization of the PBA. But as these Welsh Baptists became “democratized,” they conceded that the genius of Baptist ecclesiology lies in the self-governance of *sister* churches best served by an association that advises, not dictates nor adjudicates. They could not allow the PBA, recognizably the most powerfully influential Baptist body in colonial America, to directly undermine the Baptist distinctive of local church sovereignty. When Samuel Jones (of Welsh descent) produced a revised church discipline for the PBA’s consideration in 1797, it was adopted and published the following year with the explicit understanding that the “delegates [of the Association] are not armed with coercive power, to compel the churches to submit to their decisions” nor “have they any control over

---

<sup>66</sup>This is only one of numerous instances of Puritanism’s influence on the early Baptists, and serves to reinforce the view that Baptists were indeed Protestants.

the acts or doings of the churches” since each “church still remains independent.” Certainly, the PBA could dismiss any church they deemed “delinquent,” but even an excluded church would “still remain an independent church though an heterodox and irregular one.”<sup>67</sup>

The doctrinal consensus of the PBA, which, as we have noted, was dominated in its early years by Welsh pastors, found expression in the revision of the second London Baptist Confession, known as the Philadelphia Confession of 1742. This eloquent statement of the historical faith gave Regular Baptist congregations a unified voice for their distinctive brand of Protestant orthodoxy<sup>68</sup> and enabled Baptist leaders like the Abel Morgans to lead their churches in the path of doctrinal integrity. It also provided the necessary theological foundation for establishing hundreds of other churches of like faith and practice throughout colonial America. Surely the sustenance of Welsh customs in an American environment was important to the Morgans, but of immensely greater significance to them was the maintenance and perpetuation of sound doctrine.

---

<sup>67</sup>Samuel Jones, *A Treatise of Church Discipline and a Directory* (Lexington: T. Anderson, 1805), pp. 32–33, cited in Clark, “*To Set Them in Order*,” pp. 131–32.

<sup>68</sup>For the impact of the Philadelphia Confession on Baptist associations throughout colonial America, see Clark, “*To Set Them in Order*,” pp. 57–89.