

The Rise and Development of the English Baptists

by

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This paper describes the origins of the English Baptists and their development from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. In particular, attention is paid to the development of the different groupings of Baptists, with an attempt to analyze how theological trends affected their respective progression.

1. The First English Baptist Church

At the beginning of the seventeenth century there were numerous Separatist congregations in England trying to rediscover the Biblical pattern for a local church. Among them was a congregation in Gainsborough, led by John Smyth, which was soon driven to Amsterdam by persecution. While some other Separatists had previously come to the view that the Scriptures taught believers' baptism they did not have the courage of their convictions due to the associations with the radical Anabaptist movement on the continent.^[1] John Smyth however had no such qualms and the first English Baptist Church^[2] was born on Dutch soil, when, in 1609, he baptized himself and others in Amsterdam.^[3]

White has suggested three factors which precipitated this radical step.^[4]

Firstly, there was the unease with which Separatists viewed the baptism of what they regarded to be the 'apostate' Church of England.

Secondly, their ongoing study of the Scriptures to discover the true apostolic church lead to an understanding of believers' baptism being the ordinance which marked out the visible church.

Thirdly, there was the example of believer's baptism practiced by the Mennonites in Amsterdam which could not but have prompted their thinking on the issue.

There was soon a split within these early Baptists, with Smyth joining the Mennonites and one of his colleagues, Thomas Helwys, leading a splinter group who disagreed with Mennonite doctrine. Helwys led a group back to England in 1612 and established a congregation at Spitalfields in London.

Smyth had been one of the first Englishmen to give an unequivocal plea for religious freedom, and this was continued by Helwys once back in England.^[5] However such appeals were not heeded by James I and imprisonment of Baptist leaders soon followed including that of Helwys.

Despite such persecution this group grew slowly and by 1626 there were around 150 General Baptist's in England.^[6] These were so named because they took a 'general' or universal view of the atonement, as part of their overall Arminian theology. This resulted in their remaining isolated from other independent groups and the Puritan grouping in the Church of England who were virtually all Calvinistic.

2. The First Particular Baptists

This group held the Calvinistic theology of a limited (or particular) atonement. The first Particular Baptist Church grew out of a Separatist congregation in London that had been founded by Henry Jacob. Debates over baptism led to a series of seceding groups. Exactly what each group believed and which formed the first Particular Baptist Church is debated.

The first possible date of inception was in 1633 when a group seceded and received a second baptism; however whether this was due to their belief in believers' baptism, or their repudiation of Anglican baptism is not clear. Another seceding group in 1638 clearly left due to their holding to believers' baptism, and they formed a Baptist church under John Spilsbury.^[7] The issue of the correct mode of baptism was soon raised, which, after consultation with Dutch Baptists, received the answer of immersion.^[8] The earlier General Baptists practiced affusion, but soon adopted immersion as well. The Particular Baptists also suffered persecution, with many of its members and leaders being imprisoned, but they too experienced gradual growth.

3. A Period of Growth (1640-1660)

With the outbreak of the Civil War and the start of the Commonwealth a period of religious liberty began. This gave the Baptists much greater freedom, and non-conformity generally grew during this period. The Baptist's independent theology meant they lined up with the New Model Army against the king. In fact Baptists were prominent in the army and exercised great influence within it, which facilitated the spread of Baptist thinking.^[9] In addition many Baptists accepted preaching positions within the Church of England, and as a few became 'Triers', they also influenced the

appointment of new ministers.^[10] The new religious liberty gave opportunity for expression of Baptist views in pamphlets, which had previously been restricted by censorship of the press. There were also open debates on the subject of baptism which resulted in many being won over to Baptist theology.

This time of revolution and growth involved many splits and tensions over theological subtleties. This was seen in the Baptist camp itself, for example in the laying on of hands controversy within the General Baptist,^[11] and also in the relationship between the Baptists and more radical sects of the time. Baptists were very close to the Quakers on a number of points and, for some, the Quaker emphasis on the inner guidance of the Spirit was very attractive. Many congregations lost members to the Quakers resulting in bad feeling between the two groups.^[12] The group to most severely affect the Baptists though was the Fifth Monarchy Movement. Many churches were taken over by this radical understanding of Christ's Kingdom and a number of Baptist leaders joined the Movement.

Despite these problems this was a period of considerable growth. In 1644 there were 54 Baptist congregations in England, but by 1660 this had increased to about 130 Particular Baptist, and 110 General Baptist.^[13] This new group had become so established that the persecution to come was unable to uproot them.

4. Renewed Persecution (1660-1689)

The Restoration in 1660 began with promises of liberty of conscience from Charles II, but renewed persecution of Baptists along with other non-conformists soon began. Those who were not willing to take an oath of allegiance to the king were assumed to be seditious. Such a possibility was confirmed in many people's eyes when the Fifth Monarchy Movement led an uprising in 1661, which was crushed by force. Soon after this Charles prohibited all unlawful gatherings meeting for the purpose of religious worship.

Further persecution came under the Clarendon Code (1661-1665) with its Corporation Act (1661) and Act of Uniformity (1662), and then under the Conventicle Acts (1664, 1670). This resulted in the imprisonment and fining of dissenters, although the possibility of execution was a very real one.^[14] The Act of Uniformity resulted in the Great Ejection from the state church,

mainly comprising Presbyterians. This had two implications for the Baptists: one was that some of the ejected ministers joined the Baptist camp; the other was that dissent suddenly became both common place and somewhat respectable.^[15] The Declaration of Indulgence (1672) provided brief respite but this was soon withdrawn and persecution began again.

5. Toleration but Decline (1689-1750)

The Glorious Revolution saw the reign of William and Mary, and the Toleration Act of 1689. While certain barriers were left, such as dissenters not being allowed to hold public office, non-conformity was allowed to go its own way. Both the General and Particular Baptists took advantage of the new situation by holding General Assemblies in London. From their Assembly, the Particular Baptists published the ‘London Confession of Faith of 1689’ which became the standard of doctrine and practice.^[16] This confession drew greatly on the Westminster and Savoy Confessions, and differed in significant areas from an earlier confession in 1644 made by seven London congregations. In particular it showed movement away from some traditional Anabaptist positions and towards that of Presbyterian and Congregational polity.^[17]

Unfortunately the religious climate of England was to change over the following century and the expectations that toleration had brought were disappointed. The eighteenth century focused on commerce and science, with reason being exalted in the place of religion.^[18] The lack of religious belief led to a serious decline in moral standards – “Permissiveness was the order of the day”.^[19] Within the newly freed dissenting churches it seemed that without the prospect of persecution the life went out of them: “Lethargy came over them, as if their fight for existence had exhausted them”.^[20] Despite strength in London most Baptists (especially the General Baptists) were in rural communities which inevitably resulted in a degree of insularity. This factor, combined with public office and the universities being closed to them, and the self-absorption of theological disputes among themselves,^[21] meant that the Baptists entered a sort of backwater and left the main stage of national life.^[22]

The decline of the General and Particular Baptists also involved factors particular to their faith and practice, and so it will be helpful to examine them separately.

5.1 Decline of the General Baptists

The General Baptists had a number of sect-like practices, which they clung on to. These included foot washing, anointing the sick with oil, the laying on of hands, lifelong pastorates and refusing to eat blood.^[23] They also opposed hymn singing, and gave little attention to the training or support of their ministers. They had failed to establish themselves in any major town except London, and were found mainly in small rural communities. In such a rationalistic era all these factors told against them.

A more significant cause of decline was the slide from orthodox doctrine into Socinianism^[24] which effectively halted their previous evangelistic zeal. In this sense they had fallen prey to the spirit of the age where reason prevailed and the supernatural was scorned. The General Assembly responded to this by sacrificing doctrinal purity for the sake of unity, or at least for the appearance of unity. It condemned the heresy but protected the heretics, and at many meetings the Council simply prevented discussion of contentious subjects.^[25] In addition to theological disputes there was also much petty wrangling that reflected an atmosphere of mistrust and an extremely unhealthy preoccupation with internal affairs.^[26] The final factor was the loss of their most prominent leaders, mainly to the Particular Baptists, at the very time they were most needed.

5.2 Decline of the Particular Baptists

The Particular Baptists gave more attention to the training of pastors than their General counterparts, but they were still needful in this area, and suffered from a lack of leaders who could meaningfully engage with the accusations rationalism was throwing at the orthodox faith. However for them too, the main cause of decline was due to doctrinal change, although this time towards a more conservative rather than liberal stance. Many of them became hyper-Calvinist, particularly following the lead of strong London churches.^[27]

This had two effects:

- (1) a few drifted into antinomianism believing that the moral law was not binding for those under grace;
- (2) the evangelistic endeavour of many was stopped or at least blunted by their understanding of double-predestination.^[28]

While previous Particular Baptists had maintained their evangelistic zeal, preachers now felt paralyzed by their theology: “if Christ died not for all but only for the elect, it is useless to invite all to repent and believe in Him”.^[29] One example is given by Hoad who speaks of a pastor who was “so afraid of Arminianism and Pelagianism that he made no attempt to awaken the consciences of the unconverted lest he should despoil God of the sole glory of their conversion.”^[30] C. H. Spurgeon later commented that such theology had “chilled many churches to their soul.”^[31]

6. Revival (1750-1800)

The state of the Baptist churches at the time of the Great Awakening means that they were not in much of a position to benefit from it.^[32] However there was to be new life breathed into the General Baptist movement by the creation of the New Connexion of General Baptists. This was initiated by Dan Taylor who led a congregation at Wadsworth and cultivated close relationships with a group of independent Baptists in Leicestershire, who had also been affected by the revival. Having become disillusioned with the state of the General Baptists, Taylor moved to unite the Leicestershire group with his church and any other General Baptist churches that remained orthodox. As a result the New Connexion of General Baptists came into being in 1770. Underwood states: “it was obviously a child of the Methodist Revival, and manifested two Methodist characteristics: strong evangelistic zeal and strong corporate feeling.”^[33]

The New Connexion was well organized and prospered, resulting in 70 churches by 1817. It was particularly strong in the Midlands where it planted new churches in towns that were expanding under the influence of the Industrial Revolution. A further advance in evangelism was seen in 1816 when the General Baptist Missionary Society was formed. Attempts were made to unite the New Connexion with the old group of General Baptists but the latter’s adherence to tradition and its loose theology meant such attempts were frustrated.^[34] Within the Old General Baptist camp itself, various attempts were made to halt the decline. This mainly involved new initiatives in education of pastors, and social care and reform, but their theology continued to become increasingly liberal. We will not follow their story any further in this paper: suffice it to say that they continued an ever dwindling existence until 1916 when the few remaining churches were divided between

the Baptist Union and the British and Foreign Unitarian Society.[35]

Many of the Particular Baptists also effectively sat out of the revival, being especially sceptical of Wesley due to his Arminianism. They thought better of Whitefield but were wary of his “Arminian dialect” and “semi-Pelagian address”.[36] Despite this frosty reception Whitefield was invited to speak at a number of Particular Baptist churches and saw enthusiastic responses to his message.[37]

However a more widespread influence of the revival among the Particular Baptists was to come via America. Several men were influenced by the writings of Jonathan Edwards, and went on to argue that Calvinistic doctrine is consistent with evangelistic endeavor. In so doing they promoted a more moderate form of Calvinism and revitalized the barrenness of hyper-Calvinism.[38] Andrew Fuller was the leading figure in this regard; he published *The Gospel Worthy of all Acceptance* in 1785, having prevaricated for several years over making his views so public.[39] This book made an “immeasurable impact upon the Particular Baptists, awakened their responsibility to proclaim the gospel to ‘all who will hear it’, and paved the way for ‘evangelical Calvinism’ which was to be God’s instrument for the founding of modern world missions.”[40]

The effects of new life were seen in a variety of ways. Further societies were formed such as the Itinerant Society in 1792 by Abraham Booth which aimed at preaching in villages, and the Society for the Establishment and Support of Sunday Schools in 1785 by William Fox which sought to teach children to read the Bible. Academies for the training of Baptist pastors were founded, firstly in the north, and then in London. Most significantly overseas mission was initiated. John Sutcliffe called the Northamptonshire Association of Particular Baptist Churches to hold a monthly prayer meeting specifically to pray for the spread of the gospel,[41] and from that came the founding of the ‘Particular Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen’ in 1792 (now the Baptist Missionary Society).[42] Fuller remained the leader of that society until his death, but the more famous man who emerged from it was William Carey and his pioneering missionary work in India. At this time the Baptists were leading the way in mission, and from their first steps followed a wider renewed interest and energy in missionary endeavour.

7. The Strict and Particular Baptists (1800 onwards)

Despite widespread acceptance the new life of ‘Fullerism’ was not gladly received by all the Particular Baptists. A proportion remained steadfastly high Calvinists, although most moved forward in at least accepting their responsibility for evangelism. The area of debate for this group moved to that of church polity with issues of open or closed membership and communion becoming paramount. The leader of the conservative group in the north was William Gadsby who may be seen as the “patriarch of the present Strict and Particular Baptists”.^[43] The Gadsbyites established churches in South Lancashire and Yorkshire, which upheld the main characteristics of high-Calvinism, had extremely plain services with no instrumental music and deplored the practices of open Baptist churches. Despite their severity, they were extremely earnest and saw good work done, especially among the working classes.

There was also resistance to Fullerism in East Anglia. A circular letter in 1807 of the Norfolk and Suffolk Association denounced Fullers theology because it “tended covertly to introduce the Arminian doctrine of general redemption.”^[44] A leading conservative was George Wright, who by 1829 felt that no association could continue with more moderate Baptists. He led the way in forming a new association for the area in 1829, which had a constitution that specifically ruled out Fullerism and open communion. To spread their message the *Gospel Herald* began to be published in 1833 with the aim of warning its readers against Arminianism. This conservative group would go on to be extremely critical of the open-invitation style of preaching shown by C. H. Spurgeon. The flow of thought is illustrated by the following quote from the *Earthen Vessel*:

What is Spurgeonism but Fullerism? What is Fullerism but moderate Arminianism, and what is Arminianism but free-will and free-grace mixed with the traditions of carnal men, dished up by a depraved, inventive genius, and instructed by the Devil to overthrow the grand old cardinal doctrines of the Bible, and rob Jesus Christ of his crown?^[45]

Among the conservatives there were occasional theological controversies which resulted in minor splits. Debate over ‘the eternal generation of the Son’ for example led to supporters of *The Gospel Standard* (a periodical) declining to have any relationship with other high Calvinists and agreeing to subscribe

to a creed, described as “the quintessence of hyper-Calvinism and of exclusiveness”.[46] This was all they had in common however as part of their theological position was the total independence of each congregation.

Many conservative Baptists were not as independently minded as the Gospel Standard churches, and followed the lead of Wright in forming new associations, for example in London in 1871, and Cambridgeshire and the East Midlands in 1927. In their theology these churches have been summed up as “having advanced as far as Fullerism, but not beyond it.”[47] This statement is of course written by someone of a more liberal persuasion. Most of Strict Baptist associations have subsequently replaced the title ‘Strict’ with that of ‘Grace’, as has the Strict Baptist Mission. Some degree of national fellowship is seen today under the Grace Baptist Assembly.

8. Growth, Union and Controversy (1800 onwards)

The first attempt at a union of Particular Baptist Churches came in 1813 by the efforts of John Rippon and Joseph Ivimey.[48] Only a small percentage of churches joined this General Union of Particular Baptist Churches however and the society exercised little power. There were also the more local groupings of Particular Baptists described above. However in 1891 came the remarkable union of the Particular Baptists and the General Baptists of the New Connexion. The changes that led to this union are instructive; the three main factors listed by Underwood are:[49]

- 1.** The further decline of Calvinism among some of the Particular Baptists – the influence of the Wesleyan Revival, and the thinking that the logical corollary of universal proclamation was a universal atonement, meant that Fullerism became only a stepping stone for many to adopt Arminianism.
- 2.** The growth of the practice of open communion among both groups – the General Baptists had accepted open communion for some time with little opposition; the Particular Baptists were more divided on the subject but increasing numbers moved to an open communion position. [50] Open membership then followed closely on its heels.
- 3.** The Baptist Union of 1813, despite its initial insignificance, began to grow from the 1860’s onwards, and demonstrated the usefulness of such a union.

The fusion with the General Baptists was in many ways a continuation of the line the Particular Baptist Union had been taking for some years. In order to allow more churches to join, it had reduced its doctrinal basis to the bare minimum in 1832, simply asking for agreement in the sentiments usually denoted as evangelical.^[51] This had resulted in a number of churches from the New Connexion joining. A further reduction came in 1873, when the word ‘evangelical’ was removed. Instead there was a *Declaration of Principle* which read: “In this Union it is fully recognized that every separate church has liberty to interpret and administer the laws of Christ, and that the immersion of believers is the only Christian baptism.”^[52] As a result there was little theological rigor within the Union beyond that of ascribing to believers’ baptism.

This reduction in theological precision was resisted by many and most notably resulted in the Down Grade Controversy revolving around C. H. Spurgeon. This involved Spurgeon accusing the Union of tolerating heresy; he was particularly concerned about the acceptance of some modern Biblical criticism, and the lack of stress on the deity of Christ.^[53] This resulted in Spurgeon resigning from the Union in 1887. Despite Spurgeon’s massive popularity and support, the vast majority of the Union was against him, and gave him what became known as a ‘vote of censure’.

This controversy did finally result in the Union issuing a declaratory statement, which was similar to the doctrinal basis of the Evangelical Alliance; however the declaration made its statement only after “expressly disavowing and disallowing any power to control or restrict inquiry”.^[54] In a similar vein, when the Particular and General Baptists eventually formally merged in 1891, no confession of faith was required from either side. Due to such an open membership theological tensions have not left the Union; fears over a second ‘Down Grade Controversy’ came in the 1930’s over publication of a list of ‘Fundamentals’ which did not express substitutionary atonement as fully as some desired.^[55]

9. The Modern Baptist Union

The Baptist Union in its current state owes a great deal to John Shakespeare who was secretary from 1898 to 1924. He brought an impressive sense of organization and leadership which saw the Baptist Union raising considerable amounts of money, owning their own offices, and re-organizing Baptist

ministry. Only ministers recognized by the Union could benefit from its Sustentation Fund, leading to a list of accredited ministers, and superintendents were put in charge of districts. In addition the Council became the official voice of the churches with authority to speak on their behalf. With such moves the Baptists moved towards a hierarchical structure, with the Baptist Union becoming “the managing directorate of a national body”.^[56]

Shakespeare’s goal was actually more radical than most realized; he wanted the end of denominations and the establishment of a single united church in their place. To this end he proposed reunion with the Church of England and announced his readiness to accept re-ordination and episcopacy.^[57] Not surprisingly these views were firmly rejected by the Council. More recently the discussion has moved as to whether further unity can be achieved within the Baptist Union, such that one could talk of the Baptist Church, rather than a union of churches. This, however, moves against the essence of Baptist polity, which cannot conceive of central control of individual congregations.

For some the ecumenical drive of Shakespeare was seen again in the decision for the Baptist Union to join the British Council of Churches in 1942, and then the World Council of Churches in 1948. The reactions to these moves have been various interpreted: Payne states that “while some took a more negative attitude . . . in general closer relationships and collaboration were welcomed”.^[58] However the more conservatively minded Hoad says that such participation “provoked unease among the churches and a vigorous opposition developed including some secessions from the Union.”^[59]

As a result the Baptist Union remains a rather undefined grouping of churches with spanning a range of views. Tensions therefore remain over issues of conservative versus liberal theology and independent versus centralized church polity.

10. Conclusions

10.1 Theological change

The developments of the English Baptists will be viewed differently depending on one’s own theological position.^[60] For some the union between the Particular and New Connexion Baptists is seen as a great achievement that finally saw the end of petty theological squabbling; for others it was a terrible calamity that compromised theological purity.

The extreme conservatives would point back to Fullerism as the beginning of a slippery slope leading to the loss of essential elements of the faith. However for an evangelical today the central issue seems to be that the Union side stepped issues of doctrine in order to pursue unity. While initially this was seen as a gain, in the long term the Union has no secure foundation, and no preventative measures against either more liberal (or indeed more conservative) influences. One need look no further back than the history of the Old General Baptists to see the possibilities of where this can lead.

10.2 Theology and practice

This history demonstrates the link that will inevitably exist between theology and practice, and hence the great need to be both accurate, and where necessary, flexible in the former. Perhaps the best example of this is seen in the hyper-Calvinism of the Particular Baptists of the mid-seventeenth century – which halted their evangelistic endeavor – then being overturned by Fullerism – which renewed their evangelistic zeal. While today many think of the link between doctrine and practice as loose, this example illustrates the potential effect different theological trends can have.

10.3 Religious freedom

Despite the theological wrangling that has plagued much of Baptist history, the Baptists have also stood for religious freedom. This began with John Smyth pleading for freedom to pursue his own understanding of Biblical teaching, and has continued sine then. It is also shown in the Baptist understanding of the independence of the local church – no higher authority should exist to control what a local congregation believes.

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FOOTNOTES:

[1] Underwood (1947), p. 37.

[2] There were Anabaptist groups in England prior to this but it has proved difficult to establish an accurate definition of their views, and they were brief in their existence (White, 1996, p. 1).

[3] Brackney (1988), p. 4.

[4] White (1996), p. 19.

[5] Watts (1978), pp. 48-49.

[6] Watts (1978), p. 50.

[7] White (1996), p. 60.

[8] Watts (1978), p. 66.

[9] Hoad (1986), p. 98.

[10] Underwood (1947), pp. 65.

[11] White (1996), pp. 36-40.

[12] Brown (1986), p. 26.

[13] Watts (1978), p. 160.

[14] White (1996), pp. 106-111.

[15] Underwood (1947), p. 96.

[16] This confession was in fact drafted in 1677 to refute many of the slanderous charges against Baptist practice made at that time, and showing that they stood in the main line of Biblical Christianity, but because of the persecution of the day it had never been widely published.

[17] Hoad (1986) p. 106.

[18] Brown (1986), p. 5.

[19] Wood (1990), p. 447.

[20] Underwood (1947), p. 117.

[21] Disputes emerged over hymn singing, marriage outside the congregation, Christology, election, evangelism, antinomianism, and open or closed communion (Brown, 1986, p. 9).

[22] Brown (1986), pp. 10-12.

[23] Underwood (1947), p. 123.

[24] This mainly involved debate over the Trinity and Christology, but had implications for salvation and hence evangelism.

[25] Brown (1986), pp. 20-22.

[26] Brown (1986), pp. 23-25.

[27] The Bristol Academy stood against this trend and was essentially teaching 'Fullerism' before Fuller; however its efforts could not stem the general flow towards hyper-Calvinism.

[28] Watts (1978), p. 393.

[29] Underwood (1947), p. 134.

[30] Hoad (1986), pp. 112-3.

[31] Spurgeon (1876), p. 47, as quoted by Brown (1986).

[32] Briggs (1990), p. 408.

[33] Underwood (1947), p. 153.

[34] Brown (1986), pp. 98-99.

[35] Watts, 1978, p. 464.

[36] Whitley, quoted by Underwood (1947) p. 160.

[37] Brown (1986), pp. 79-82.

[38] Watts (1978), p. 459. They were especially influenced by Edwards' *Inquiry into the Freedom of the Will*. The first significant publication in Britain in this vein was Robert Hall's *Help to Zion's Travellers* in 1781 (Briggs, 1994, p. 99)

[39] Briggs (1990), p. 409.

[40] Hoad (1986), pp. 119-120.

[41] Sutcliffe was prompted to this action by reading Jonathan Edwards' *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion & the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth*, again showing the influence Edwards had on the Baptists in England (Watts, 1978, p. 460).

[42] Briggs (1990), p. 409.

- [43] Underwood (1947), p. 185.
- [44] Underwood (1947), p. 188.
- [45] Cited *Baptist Magazine* March 1888, p. 129.
- [46] Whitley, as quoted by Underwood (1947), p. 245.
- [47] Underwood (1947), p. 247.
- [48] Payne (1958), pp. 15-19.
- [49] Underwood (1947), pp. 202-213.
- [50] Briggs (1994), pp. 66-67.
- [51] Payne (1958), p. 61.
- [52] Payne (1958), p. 109.
- [53] Johnson (1984), p. 1051.
- [54] Payne (1958), p. 271.
- [55] Payne (1958), p. 205.
- [56] Hoad (1986), p. 131.
- [57] Underwood (1947), p. 252.
- [58] Payne (1958), p. 221.
- [59] Hoad (1986), p. 132.
- [60] This is illustrated by the differing interpretations given by Payne and Hoad regarding ecumenical associations mentioned above.

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