

An Idea of Freedom

“The origin of this church, as of all the older Congregational Churches in Scotland, is traceable to that great wave of religious revival that flooded Scotland in the closing years of the eighteenth century. Foremost among the leaders of that movement were the brothers James and Robert Haldane, and associated with them were others of like mind, among whom was John Aikman, the founder and first minister of this church.”

The last decades of the eighteenth century and opening decades of the nineteenth century were marked by both radicalism and also great spiritual revival and evangelism in Scotland. Both were inspired by the ideals of freedom and republicanism inherent in the French Revolution and Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* (1791-2) as well as the perceived moribund state of the dominant Church of Scotland. The roots of Congregationalism can be discovered in this revival, or so-called 'radical reformation'. Congregationalism originated in the evangelistic campaigns of 1797 onwards that were spearheaded by brothers Robert (1764-1842) and James Haldane (1768-1851) and a group of like-minded friends that included Augustine’s first minister, John Aikman.

This group of itinerant preachers travelled through the north of Scotland, from Queensferry to Orkney, with the aims of spreading the Gospel by preaching sermons, often in the open air, setting up Sunday Schools for both children and adults, and leaving a trail of 20,000 tracts.

Following their tour of the Highlands, the Haldane brothers, Aikman and others established the Society for Propagating the Gospel at Home (SPGH) and held their first meeting in Edinburgh in 1798. The Society had three main priorities: mission (as illustrated by the evangelistic tour and subsequent church planting), ecumenism and education.

These lay preachers did not set out to establish a separate denomination.

‘Undenominational’ lay preachers were trained and supported but the SPGH was intended to function within the Church of Scotland. However, the Church of Scotland regarded this group and its actions, particularly lay preaching and setting up ‘unauthorised’ Sunday

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Schools, as a challenge to the *status quo* and it appealed to the Government to suppress this 'radicalism'.

Due to the ongoing hostility from the Church of Scotland, the SPGH group met in December 1798 and resolved to create a Congregational Church from the proceeds Robert Haldane received following the sale of his family's Airthrey estate (now home to the University of Stirling). This resolution led to the opening of a worship space at The Circus on Little King Street, Edinburgh, with James Haldane ordained and inducted on 3 February 1799.

By 1807, 85 Congregational churches had been 'planted' in both rural and urban areas, often in places where a movement known as Friends of the People was also making an impact. Friends of the People campaigned for reform in the political sphere, including the extension of the franchise to give middle class men the vote. It was no surprise that these areas returned liberal and radical members of parliament.

Adam Black, the publisher and politician who was to become a key player in the early development of Augustine, supported and campaigned for the Friends' cause and held reformers meetings in his shop. When the franchise was extended to middle class men with the passing of the Reform Act in 1833, Black himself was instrumental in putting forward his choice of parliamentary candidates and later, at the age of 70, he ran for election and became a Liberal Member of Parliament for nearly ten years.

The Friends of the People were also instrumental in motivating change in the *religious* sphere in terms of church structure. Indeed the Congregational Church in Paisley 'originated in the great agitations of the Friends of the People, when a number a number of people began to see that reform was needed in the Church as well as in the State... they sought relief in dissent by forming themselves into an independent church.'

November 1812 marked the formation of the Congregational Union with two principal aims: 'church aid and home mission'. An early report stated as the Union's primary objective:

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the relief of Congregational Churches in Scotland, united in the faith and hope of the Gospel, who, from their poverty, the fewness of their numbers, or from debt upon their places of worship, are unable to provide for their Ministration of the word of God... which would tend most to their edification, and the eternal happiness of those around them.

In other words, the Union helped alleviate financial difficulties associated with ministers' salaries and building costs: a case of local churches helping one another, especially wealthier ones supporting poorer ones. The Union enabled ministers to devote themselves solely to ministry rather than topping up their living costs with secular employment, and meant that many churches were saved from extinction. Each individual congregation retained its own autonomy while enjoying the mutuality and support of its sister churches.

John Aikman

John Aikman was born in Bo'ness in 1770, the son of a baker, and went at an early age to Jamaica to join his half brother, Alexander, who had become a newspaper proprietor and printer to the local government as well as having three plantations.

On a visit home, partly on business, partly for reasons of health, John set about selecting books in London as part of a plan to start a library in Jamaica. Among others he purchased a book called *Cardiphonia, or Utterances of the Heart*, which from its title he judged to be a novel. It turned out to be a religious work by the Revd John Newton of Olney, a former master of a slave ship—turned abolitionist, and author of the hymn “Amazing Grace”. It appears that the reading of this book led to Aikman's conversion. He went back to Jamaica but, for reasons that are unclear but which may have related to his conversion, he now chose to relinquish his share in the family businesses.

Did he now object to profiting from business that took place on the Sabbath? Or had he come to a view that the use of slaves was immoral? Twelve years after his death in 1834, his congregation faced accusations from the Free Church that Aikman had built his chapel in North College Street, Edinburgh, on the proceeds of slavery. Certainly he had acquired sufficient wealth that he was able to fund the building and minister to his congregation without a stipend. It is hardly likely that he couldn't have benefited in some way from business that involved slaves. Indeed, when slaves were finally emancipated, his brother received compensation from the British Government of £6,900 for 350 freed slaves, dying shortly after a wealthy and prominent member of his community.

It may simply have been that Aikman's sense of calling to ministry overwhelmed any other commitment he had to business interests in Jamaica. What is known is that on returning home he started studying at the University of Edinburgh with a view to qualifying for the ministry.

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In Edinburgh, the Haldane brothers, assisted by John Aikman, preached and held meetings not in a church but at The Circus on King Street (now Little King Street) at the head of Leith Walk, on what was later the site of the Theatre Royal and where, nowadays, halls belonging to the Roman Catholic Cathedral are situated. Subsequently, the congregation established the Tabernacle on the site now occupied by the Playhouse Theatre. In its turn, the congregation here outgrew the space and a second congregation was constituted in 1802. This church was North College Street Chapel, the first direct incarnation of Augustine United Church, and John Aikman was its founding minister.



Map: "The Strangers Guide" published by R. Scott, Edinburgh 10 May 1805, showing John Aikman's new chapel on North College Street. References #12 on North College Street as "Tabernacle Meeting House. Back of College." ([Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike \(CC-BY-NC-SA\) licence.](#))

North College Street Chapel

On 17 May 1800, in the Circus and in the presence of an immense congregation, John Aikman was ordained to the ministry. Following the move to the Tabernacle and the rapid growth of the congregation, Aikman, aged 32, decided to form a new church. At his own expense he erected a building for the purpose in North College Street, a narrow irregular street that ran along what is now the south side of Chambers Street. (See p.34)

John Aikman's ministry

A man of independent means, John Aikman pastored the North College Street congregation until his death in 1834 without receiving a salary or stipend. (Interestingly, being a minister with 'independent means' appears to have become a bone of contention for Aikman's colleague, John Watson.) He also lectured for a time at the Theological Academy in Edinburgh, the forerunner of Theological Hall.

Aikman suffered from poor health, which frequently incapacitated him.

As a preacher Mr Aikman is said to have excelled in exposition. His style was chaste and simple, and his sermons were carefully prepared. He suffered from weakness of the eyes, and found brightness so intolerable that he had to write on dark coloured paper. For weeks together he had to sit in a darkened room to relieve his eyes, and yet he was so devoted to his work that he persevered in facing the glare of lights at the evening services.

Nevertheless, in the tradition of the Haldanes, he undertook numerous preaching tours in various parts of Scotland. His knowledge of French enabled him to converse with, and preach to, French prisoners who were held in Edinburgh Castle, and at numerous depots throughout the country – one of them in a depot in Penicuik, which Aikman visited weekly in order to preach to the prisoners.

He also spoke German and, in 1815, went to Hamburg and preached to the British residents and shipping crews there. One outcome of this tour was the formation of a Congregational

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church in that city.

In 1812, John Aikman presided at the meeting at which the Congregational Union of Scotland was formed, so may be regarded as its first Chairman. He died on 6 February 1834, aged 64, and was buried under the communion table in the church that he had built, his old friend James Haldane preaching his funeral sermon. When the church, now renamed Argyle Square Chapel, was pulled down Aikman's remains were reinterred in Greyfriars Churchyard, where an obelisk stands to his memory. The inscription begins:

The Revd John Aikman: one of the founders of the congregational churches of Scotland and pastor of the church assembling in Argyle Square Chapel Edinburgh Died 6th February 1834 aged 64 years having built that chapel at his own expense and ministered in it gratuitously for 36 years...

The wording echoes that of a granite memorial plaque that had been attached to the wall of Argyle Square; this was retained and later mounted in Dalry Congregational Church, itself funded from the proceeds of the sale of North College Street Chapel in 1856. When members of the Dalry congregation moved to Augustine in 2005, the plaque came with them to George IV Bridge – a kind of homecoming from John Aikman.



Photo: John Aikman obelisk in Greyfriars Kirkyard (Photo by Simon Jones)