

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

The Glasshouse Yard Minute Book, 1682-1740.

LESS than a mile from the site of its old meeting-place, "in an alley darkened by the frowning walls of the Charterhouse," there recently came to light the Minute Book of the Glasshouse Yard Church for the years 1682 to 1740. It has been secured for the Angus Library of Regent's Park College, and its careful study may be expected to throw a number of interesting and important sidelights on the Baptist life of London during the last years of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth. The Glasshouse Yard Church has maintained its existence, amid many changes, for more than two hundred and fifty years, being to-day located in Winchmore Hill, but until the discovery of this Minute Book it was not known that detailed records existed earlier than 1740.

The find consists of a substantial folio volume of five hundred and fifty pages, in good condition. On the fly-leaf it is described as "The Church Book for Goswell Street, September 1680," but the earliest entries in it are dated May, 1682. There are Minutes of Church Meetings held at fairly frequent intervals from then until July, 1740, and duly signed by the men present. In addition—and these are among the most valuable pages in view of present-day discussions—there are accounts of general gatherings of several London Baptist groups in the years 1692, 1697 and 1737, and also letters addressed to the Glasshouse Yard Church by its associates in the years 1715 and 1728.

The Glasshouse Yard meeting-house belonged to a company of General Baptists. Dr. Whitley suggests that they were first gathered together, not many years after the Restoration, by Francis Smith, a prominent Baptist bookseller. Smith did not die until 1691, but his signature does not anywhere occur in this Minute Book. The various General Baptist Churches in London were very closely linked together in the seventeenth century, so closely, indeed, that they described themselves as the different parts of one congregation. The records here preserved of general gatherings refer to sections meeting at White's Alley in Moorfields (here were the descendants of the original Baptist Church formed in Amsterdam in 1609 and transplanted to London in 1612; four volumes of its Minutes, beginning

1681, are now in the Guildhall Library), at Rupert Street in Goodman's Fields, at the dockhead at Shad Thames, at Duke Street "in the parke Southwark," at Hart Street, Covent Garden, and at Glasshouse Yard in Goswell Street. In 1692 the others dissociated themselves from the group at Covent Garden because the latter were receiving at the Communion Table some who had not submitted to the Laying on of Hands. These General Baptists took as their standard of profession and practice "the six principles of the Christian Religion mentioned Heb. 6, 1 & 2." Each section might discipline its own members except in cases of special complexity, when the help of the others was sought. The various Elders worked on a plan similar to a modern Methodist circuit. Elders and Deacons were appointed "by the general consent of the whole." Yearly, "for the preservation of a cordial union," there was a Communion Service at which all the parts met together; "only whereas many of our Brethren which belong to Goodman's Fields Meeting differ from the other parts in the manner of the Lord's Supper, it is agreed that they may have their liberty to absent from this general yearly meeting if they please."

Before their full value can be known these records will require careful study and comparison with other contemporary sources. A few points regarding the Glasshouse Yard Minutes may be noted at once however. Those between 1682 and 1684 are usually signed first by John Dewbury, who was clearly the presiding Elder. Between 1686 and 1690 the name of Francis Stanley frequently heads the list; he was a leading Northamptonshire General Baptist, who exercised a wide ministry in the Midlands, and it is interesting to find him in a position of authority in this London Church. In 1687 Thomas Kerby was ordained as Elder at Glasshouse Yard, Francis Stanley preaching a special sermon for the occasion, and Kerby's signature is the first to almost all the Minutes from then until 1726—that is, for the long period of thirty-nine years, covering the reigns of James II, William and Mary, Anne, and George I. Two years before the last entry to which he put his name, in 1724, another Elder had been appointed to be Kerby's junior colleague, one Joseph Morris, who, like a number of his contemporaries, had received part of his ministerial training in Holland. Morris continued to be the leader of the Church till 1755, long after another Minute Book had had to be secured.

A first reading of this book does not yield many echoes of the important political changes of the years. On April 18th, 1687, James II.'s Declaration of Indulgence led to the members informing Justice Smyth "that a people called Anabaptists did meet at the meeting-house in Glasshouse Yard," and during the

reign of Queen Anne they joined in the thanksgiving days ordered by Royal Proclamation for Marlborough's victories, but in the main it was purely denominational and domestic business that engaged them. Members were strictly disciplined—for failing to attend the services, for moral lapses, for becoming "unequally yoked with unbelievers," for getting into debt, and so on. There were theological controversies. In 1697 William Russell, the King's chemist, and one of the leading members of the Church, broke away with a number of others and set up "an unwarantable and sizmactickall meeting," after charging Thomas Kerby and his friends—absolutely falsely as they declared—with sympathy with the opinions of Matthew Caffin. A generation later one of the members was disciplined for suggesting that Joseph Morris was tainted with Arianism. Two letters from the other Churches to the Glasshouse Yard group admonished the latter for their lack of unity.

The Glasshouse Yard Church was one of those helped by Captain Pierce Johns, and his bequests in 1699 caused a number of disputes. In 1702 the meeting-house was altered, and in 1707 and again in 1726 discussions took place regarding the charges for the use of the burial ground, which was becoming crowded. In 1729 collections at the doors at the services were given up in favour of subscriptions. Next year the question of singing in public worship was debated, and it was finally agreed that "when singing the praises of God is used in this church, it shall be done after the rest of the service." Delegates were appointed to the meeting of the Dissenting Deputies, who sought to care for the civil rights of Nonconformists, as early as 1733.

Between the pages of this Minute Book are one or two interesting letters. There is, for example, one to Thomas Kerby telling of the promising beginnings made in Virginia and appealing for financial help. Another comes from the "administrator and other of the relations of one Sarah Carter deceased, spinster and parishioner of the town of Daventry in the County of Northton, who was refused interment as well as Christian Buriall in the Churchyard of the said town of Daventry for the space of Twelvemonth by Mr. William Taylor, Vicar of the said Parish," and asks for help in fighting for their rights in the courts. The following choice and touching specimen of the art of the begging letter is worth quoting in full:—

Nov. ye 23rd. 1723

Kind and Loveing Brethren,

I return you many thanks with the rest of the Church for what Kindness I have Received, and should be Glad if

Any Kind Member had any small matter of Cloathing to bestow on a Poor Member, should be very Thankfull for ye same. Being reduced to a very Low Ebb which makes me forced sometimes to abscond the Holy Sacrament because of my poverty and apperell.

Still I hope to remain

A Faithfull Brother but through mercy

John Cooper

And here this old Minute Book must be left for the time being.

ERNEST A. PAYNE.

THE SOUTHWARK MONTHLY MEETING of Friends had a remarkable case of marriage to consider in 1667, and the entries have just been published in the *Journal* of the Friends' Historical Society. A man was a member of the Baptist Church in Southwark, known from 1624, and now after 300 years in Church Street, Deptford. He married a Friend. He changed his mind, and appealed to his church to declare the marriage null, because he was a believer, and she an unbeliever. The Elder, Henry Clayton, and the church, agreed. The man then married a member of his church. The Friends asked for a conference, held in Tooley Street on the 13th day of the second month 1667. Clayton acknowledged the man a knave, and the first wife as bad or worse; but justified the separation: he declined to say whether the second wife knew all the facts. The Friends appealed to the London Association of General Baptists. Five leading Elders disowned Clayton and said that such practices were beside their principles, signing a lengthy opinion on the 22nd day of the fourth month. The case led to a debate in the Assembly next year, and a resolution on the 4th day of the third month 1668, which governed General Baptist marriage customs for more than a century. It led to Clayton retiring from the Eldership, in which he was followed by Benjamin Keach, who was ordained that same year.