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

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

The Calling and Ordination of Ministers in the Eighteenth Century

THE Baptist Church at Burnham-on-Crouch was in all probability founded in 1659. The earliest minute book in existence bears the date December, 1673, but by that time there was obviously a church of some standing in existence. Other evidence points to the earlier date. The first minute of a Church Meeting, dated 1699, occurs in between pages of contributions and disbursements, at the reverse end of the book, quite clearly indicating that such meetings were unusual or rarely recorded. Unfortunately the month is missing owing to the destruction of the corner of the page. At that meeting there were some thirty members present, twenty-seven of whom signed the minutes. The minutes record the fact that at that gathering two members, Thomas Lilly and Henery (sic) Fields "were chosen for elders to serve the Lord by the Church in and about Burnham, when they shall be orderly ordained to that office." It is obvious, however, that the simple resolution of the church was not sufficient for the purpose, as a year later the Church asked for a Messenger to be sent from the General Baptist Assembly to ordain these two men. These Elders were clearly ordained not only to minister to the congregation at Burnham, but also to like congregations in the district. This proved to be the beginning of a considerable succession which was sustained fairly continually until 1755 when the name of John Steben appears as Elder for the last time.

In 1772 Ham Stacey, a farmer, said to be an Arian, signed himself as Minister, the first use of that title. As far back as 1762, however, his name appears as having the meeting in his house.

The two Elders above-mentioned headed the list of those who signed the minutes until the first-named dropped out, but Henery Fields' name is perpetuated till April, 1728. The next to succeed him was John Cable. "On the 12th day of March, 1729," all the members that were met together did make choice of Brother John Cable to serve the Church as an Elder." The Ordination took place on the 6th May, 1729, which was kept as a day of fasting and prayer "to begin at 9 a.m. and end at 3 p.m." There is, however, in this appointment, no reference to serving "about Burnham." In all probability he was elected to be the presiding Elder in the Church at Burnham itself.

It is quite clear that at this time the question of appointment, recognition and ordination of elders was exercising the minds of our churches. Many of them had no regular ministry and, in some cases, as at Burnham, there was a plurality of Elders or Pastors. J. J. Goadby, in his *Bye-paths in Baptist History*, tells us that in 1704 the Church at Burnham presented "a case" to the General Assembly of General Baptists "in respect to the calling of ministers." This was answered by the Assembly in seven breviate. These declared that any brother who felt that he had a gift to be improved for the benefit of the church, ought to be permitted to express the same, and both he and the church ought to be willing to abide by the decision of the Church Meeting. Breviate No. 7 is perhaps the most important for the present purpose. "We look upon it to be the duty of every member of Christ's Church to love and encourage every gifted brother, and to pray for him, with all seriousness; which may be the means to prevail with God to enlarge their gifts, and to send forth more labourers." This, undoubtedly, was not only an answer to the question set by the church at Burnham, but a general directive to all the churches in the General Association of General Baptists.

The time from the death of Ham Stacey in 1789 until the early years of the next century were years of decline and struggle. In that year "there were but four members liveing (sic) and one of them a Judas," but largely through the instrumentality of John Elliot, a native of Burnham, residing then in Clapham, the work was revived. A new sense of ministerial significance came in 1808. John Garrington, at one time a sailor, now a schoolmaster in the town, had been appointed Secretary in February, 1801, to which office he added that of "Cashier" a few years later. When Mr. G. J. Pincharde, a surgeon, an apothecary, a midwife and a minister, resigned the pastorate in 1808, Mr. Garrington, who had already "read sermons" in the interval prior to Mr. Pincharde's ministry, was again called upon for the same service. He had already been called out by the church to preach the Gospel, during the ministry of his pastor, but "being dependent upon his school for a livelihood, and wanting confidence in his own ability for public preaching," he hesitated to conform to the will of the church.

Later that year, however, "he felt obliged to commence public preaching and thereafter till the May of the following year he preached twice a Sunday and once in the week at home," still without any intention or desire of becoming pastor of the church. After considerable delay in securing a minister and particularly after the visit of a Mr. Adams of Bristol Academy who came "on probation" for eleven weeks and was even then declined, the way appeared quite clear for the one practical solution—namely, the calling of John Garrington to the vacant pastorate. This the church

did unanimously in May, 1810, but the young schoolmaster's diffidence and "the weighty considerations which needed careful thought" preventing him from accepting the invitation which the church pressed upon him again in the December of that year.

It was not till the March of 1811, that this able young man of thirty-three years "after much prayer yielded to the invitation of the Church." A minute of the previous month records a Church Meeting at which "much conversation took place relative to Bro. Garrington being ordained pastor of the Church, which, however, from the view that Bro. Garrington has of the vast solemnity and greatness of the charge and of his insufficiency and his unworthiness did not come to a resolution."

That diffidence was finally overcome and at an Ordination Service in May, 1811, which lasted from 11 a.m. until 3.15 p.m. the good man was ordained.

John Garrington became the Apostle of the Dengie Hundred. Among the many ventures of faith in the district which he either inaugurated or helped was the work at Tillingham which had been commenced by a missionary sent from the Essex Association of that time, a forerunner of the present one. This church was put under his pastoral care. Ten years later the members at Tillingham felt that the time had come when "the Lord will build up Zion at Tillingham." They presented a "humble petition" to the church at Burnham to be dismissed "in order to form a separate and distinct Church." This was later done and at the meeting when the church was formally founded amid very moving scenes, Bro. George Wesley (sic) was "ordained" after recalling the circumstances of his call, making a statement of his faith and the "articles" he hoped to make the subject of his future ministry. Thus the church both at Burnham and at Tillingham seemed to have moved towards the modern conception of the call and recognition of the minister.

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Mennonite Quarterly Review, January, 1956, has articles on Anabaptist pacifism, the Balk Mennonites, the Risser Letters and the use of mediaeval theological writings among the Anabaptists.