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To cite this version:

Anne Dunan-Page. Letters and records of the dissenting congregations: David Crosley, Cripplegate and Baptist Church life. Anne Dunan-Page and Clotilde Prunier. Debating the Faith : Religion and Letter Writing in Great Britain, 1550-1800, Springer, pp.69-87, 2013, International Archives of the History of Ideas 209. hal-00834852

HAL Id: hal-00834852

https://hal.science/hal-00834852

Submitted on 17 Jun 2013

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Letters and records of the dissenting congregations: David Crosley, Cripplegate and Baptist Church life[1]

Anne Dunan-Page

Abstract
This chapter examines the status and function of letters in manuscript records of dissenting Churches of the post-Toleration years, concentrating on the correspondence of the Baptist Church of Cripplegate. The letters are placed in the context of controversies about Church government and discipline and the rhetoric used during the scandal caused by the excommunication of its Northern minister David Crosley for drinking, lying and adultery is assessed. In doing so, the chapter pays particular attention to the epistolary exchanges between metropolitan and provincial congregations and to what they reveal about conceptions of the Baptist ministry.

Introduction

On 30th September, 1717, the Church Book of the London Baptist congregation meeting in Curriers' Hall, Cripplegate, recorded the following entry:

> Septem 30th 1717: being the publick Church Meeting for decipline affter Sum time was spent in prayer, proseeded to Busness
> A Letter being recd from Sister Emerton was presented to the Church & Read, in which she desires her dismission To the Baptised Church at Wantege
> Agreed That a Letter of desmission be sent her and Br Skiner is desired to draw it up
> A Letter received fom Br Edward Belchamber was Read
> A Letter from Sister Katherine Dean was Read
> A Letter from the Church of Christ at Exon was presented to the Church and Read, Relateing to Mr Trend, But was not agreable to what we desired it was Resolved that <this> Church will receive Mr Trind into full

[1] This chapter was written during a period of academic leave granted by the CNRS at the Maison Française d'Oxford in 2010-2011. It could not have been researched without the support of Regent's Park College, Oxford, whose manuscripts I cite with permission. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Emma Walsh and her colleagues, Julian Lock, Emily Burgoyne and Sheila Wood, and for discussion about Crosley, to John Briggs, Stephen Copson and Timothy Whelan.

> Communion haveing receid a Satesfactory account of his repentance and humeliation and by virtue of their Letter dated May 26:[2]

This entry reveals that the 'business' of a metropolitan congregation at the beginning of the eighteenth century was transacted to a large extent by letter. Letters were received and brought to the attention of the community, letters were 'read', letters were 'draw[n] up', letters were 'sent', letters were 'presented' for the Church to discuss and letters were preserved for future reference. Some were sent from members to the Church, asking to be dismissed. Some were sent to other Churches, either to recommend an applicant for admission or to investigate controversial cases as in this example of a Brother Trend (or Trind) whose repentance for an unnamed offence was deemed unsatisfactory. Once a month, in a meeting dealing with broader issues of discipline, ordained elders and deacons came together with the laity, women with men from the communities of London, Wantage and Exeter. Individual items were carefully examined after a prayer for the harmonious expedition of the day's affairs. Decisions to write letters, and decisions about their contents, were reached collaboratively and letters were signed by (male) members on the authority of the whole Church.

As this entry shows, dissenting letter-writing was not confined to the larger correspondence of a few gifted individuals, writers or ministers. Emerton, Skinner, Belchamber, Dean and Trend are Baptist letter-writers who have left no other trace in history than their mention in their Church records. Yet they all participated in a dissenting epistolary culture that this chapter will attempt to chart through the example of Cripplegate's correspondence with its most controversial pastor, David Crosley.

4.1 Church records and epistolarity: the example of Cripplegate

The letters of 1717 were only summarized, not inserted. The issues raised by Dean or Belchamber were not deemed worthy of inclusion, perhaps because they dealt with a matter not judged sufficiently important or because they were already well-known to the Church. Letters of recommendation were rarely dwelt upon either; they were a staple of congregational discipline, preserving good inter-congregational relations and ensuring that the Church had nothing against an applicant. A conversion narrative was not

[2] 'Cripplegate (Curriers Hall) Church Book, 1689-1723', The Angus Library and Archive, Regent's Park College, Oxford, FPC E1, fol. 99v. Thereafter CCB. Interlinear insertions are indicated by < >, editorial interventions by [ ] and deletions by ~~word~~. The original spelling and punctuation have been maintained.

required of those who had already been in full communion with another Church and a recommendation letter was generally all that was known about a newcomer.

What claims can be made for the value of Church records for the historian of epistolarity if those documents often cross-reference letters without describing or giving the originals, and if letters were perhaps sometimes omitted to avoid transmitting an embarrassing image to posterity? The question raises the broader issue of the records as sources for the history of gathered Churches. Ninety years ago, Wheeler Robinson launched an appeal for denominational history as 'anthropology' and used Baptist records, and the Cripplegate book in particular (whose first folios, or 'book of discipline', he had edited the year before), to show how historians could approach Church life and social history (Wheeler Robinson 1924-1925, 109). Some ninety years after Robinson, historians are especially concerned with the partiality of the Church records and with deceptive patterns in what happens to survive, both of which may limit the value of these documents for the comprehensive project that Robinson envisaged. Baptist records are still buried, for the most part, in county archives or lie uncatalogued in private hands; no systematic attempt has been made to identify and study them and they still await their historian such as the colonial and congregationalist materials have found (Cooper 1999; Halcomb 2010). This chapter works towards a study of the surviving early Baptist records, one that pays particular attention not only to their contents but also to their form, and which seeks to explore the ways that letters, among other documents, participate in the writing of a Church's history. Not all letters were as cursorily described as those mentioned above and Cripplegate is a particularly striking example of how they were preserved, understood and used.

When its surviving records open in 1689, this Church had been in existence for over forty years. It was ministered to by Hanserd Knollys, assisted by Robert Steed, who replaced Knollys when he died in 1691. It changed location many times, especially during the Restoration. In 1689 it was meeting in George Yard, Thames Street, then moved to the Bagnio, Newgate Street, and finally to Curriers' Hall, Cripplegate. It had grown by then into a large congregation, drawing members, according to its first register, from an area beginning at Westminster in the western extreme, then passing along the Strand into Haymarket and 'the Middle of the Citty', reaching beyond the old walls east to Whitechapel, Bishopsgate Street and Wapping, then crossing the river to

Southwark.[3] The opening register records the names of 84 women and 41 men, a 2:1 ratio not untypical of other metropolitan Particular Baptist congregations in the eighteenth century (MacDonald 1982, 94-5, 108, 131, 221, 224, 292).

No matter how precise printed Church orders might be concerning the correct procedure for gathering a Church, for selecting and ordaining officers and dealing with cases of discipline, there was no guidance on how Church records should be kept, hence the notable diversity of the materials they contain: registers of members, minutes of meetings, accounts, disciplinary cases, letters, narratives of the gathering of the Churches, controversies and details of ordinations. The terminology, however, was fairly consistent. Church affairs were transcribed in a 'book' often known as 'The Booke of Records'.[4] Congregations paid particular attention to these valuable objects, often taking care to record their purchase and the price paid: 'This Booke was bought by John Lupton at London: and is to keepe in memory such things as are of much Conscernment and of spetiall note hapninge to the baptised people and Churchis in Lincolnshire and in spectiall for and belonginge to the Congregation at Consby and Tatershall.'[5] In Covent Garden, 'Bror: Price doe buy a booke to enter therein the Act of the Churches and all matters & p[ro]ceedings relating to the said meeting;[6] in Bromsgrove, 'The Church Booke cost 2 sh. 3d day of the 4th moneth 1670'[7]; and in Slapton, on 13th June 1690, the deacon, paid one shilling 'for this Booke'.[8]

The contents of each book were left to the judgement of the pastor. One of the minsters most forthcoming on this subject is Isaac Gardner, the pastor of Hamsterley and Cold Knowley:

> N.B. This Book Came to my hand soon after Bror [William] Carrs Death & I find their has been Omitted writeing any remarkable passages in it, since ye year. 1731./2. It belongs to ye Church of Christ, Baptised on ye Profession of Faith, meeting at Hamsterly & Coldrowly in the County of Durham: & is Desighned for ye Churches Book, wherein ye Minister or

[3] CCB, fol. 1r.
[4] Reading, 1656-1770, photocopy of the original in Berkshire Country Record Office, ref. D/N2 1/1, The Angus Library and Archive, Regent's Park College, Oxford, fol.1.
[5] Coningsby and Tattershall, 1654-1728, The Angus Library and Archive, Regent's Park College, Oxford, fol. 3.
[6] 'The Church Book att Covent Garden Anno: 1691 to Anno: 1699', The Angus Library and Archive, Regent's Park College, Oxford, fol. 4.
[7] Bromsgrove, volume 1, 1670-1715, The Angus Library and Archive, Regent's Park College, Oxford, fol. 3.
[8] Slapton, The Angus Library and Archive, Regent's Park College, Oxford, fol. 7.

> Ruleing Elder or Pastor is to set downe some of ye most remarkable Occurrances & Transactions of ye Church, not only for ye more Orderly Observeing of ye things Concluded on for ye time present, but also for ye Direction and Comfort of ye Generations to Come, into whose hands, thro' ye providence of God, it may fall. Isaac Garner.[9]

The book belonged to the Church as a collective body. According to Gardner, it was meant to preserve the memory and history of the Church, a conception shared, for instance, by the Reading community whose book is called 'A Book of Remembrance'.[10] The congregational Church at Axminster used exactly the same terms:

> Shall kingdoms and commonwealths have their chronicles, civil courts their rolls and records? Shall tradesmen keep their books of accounts, lawyers their books of precedents, physicians their collections of experiments, and travellers their journals? And shall not the churches of Christ have their registers and books of remembrance wherein they may record their church transactions and the various dealings of God with them?[11]

If a Church book recorded 'remarkable Occurrances and Transactions', most congregations used it as a minute book, with abridged transactions of meetings, evidence of the movement of members and, occasionally, financial accounts.

Any uncertainty as to whether Church books should record the extraordinary, the mundane, or both were solved in the largest and most prosperous congregations of London by keeping several books, depending on the nature of the material. in February 1693, Luke Leader of Maze Pond was instructed to buy a separate book for the accounts and poor-money, as he was keeping, in parallel, 'the Church Book to wright therein the Churches proceedings'.[12] Devonshire Square had separate registers of members and account books.[13] Since no financial accounts appear in the Cripplegate records, that community may well have adopted the same solution.

For the period 1689-1723, Cripplegate did not only have a Church book, and, perhaps, a separate account book; it also had a 'minute' book which has not survived

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[9] '1651-1832. Records and Letters Relative to the Baptist Church at Hexham, from Oct 1651 to July 1680. Followed by Records of the Church at Hamsterly in the County of Durham', The Angus Library and Archive, Regent's Park College, Oxford, fol. 17.

[10] Reading, fol. 1.

[11] *The Axminster Ecclesiastica, 1660-1698* (1874), ed. K. W. H. Howard (Ossett: Gospel Tidings Publications, 1976), 2.

[12] 'Maze Pond Church Book, Folio (1691-1708)', The Angus Library and Archive, Regent's Park College, Oxford, fol. 93.

[13] Guildhall Library MS 20228/1A and MS 20230.

but is mentioned several times in the Church book. In January, 1703, it was decided that James Newton would be paid thirty shilling every three months for visiting the members who had failed to contribute to the maintenance of the minister and for 'his writing ye Minutes, and other concerns of ye Church'.[14] Entrusting the minutes to a paid lay member, while the pastor kept the Church book, may suggest that the latter document had precedence over the former and was a choice place for 'remarkable Occurrences' only. And yet, Cripplegate never clarified the relationship between its two volumes.

The Cripplegate Church book begins with a calendar of its first folios, compiled in 1707, followed by an undated register of members. It continues for eleven years as what Wheeler Robinson called a 'discipline' book (Wheeler Robinson 1922-1923). There are entries concerning admonitions and excommunications, consistently written in Robert Steed's small and neat hand, from 26 February 1689 to 14 February 1700, with insertions of later material since Steed never felt the need to fill in the whole folio. It is not entirely accurate, however, to describe that first decade of records as entirely 'disciplinary' since it also contains Steed's version of the departure of some members to found a new Church. These, including Luke Leader and Edward Sandford, had temporarily joined Cripplegate after they had left Benjamin Keach's congregation in Horseleydown over the question of hymn singing. When the time came to embody their own Church, a controversy erupted in Cripplegate, Steed deeming them not mature enough to 'sett downe by themselves as à [sic] distinct church'.[15] This prompted the departure of Steed's assistant, Richard Claridge, who had sided with Leader and Sandford.

From Steed's death in 1700, the Church began recording what Isaac Gardner would indeed have called 'remarkable' events. The schism of Richard Paine, who took exception to the Church's offer of the pastorate to David Crosley, was followed by the ordination of Crosley on 12 February 1703 in the presence of the London elders Joseph Stennett, Richard Adams and John Pigott, and of some deacons. Shortly after followed amended 'Articles of the Church' in 1705, followed by the case of a converted Quaker couple who sought admission while professing 'to keep ye 7th day'. Finally came the renewal of the covenant, and the decision, conducted in the form of letters, not to attend

[14] CCB, fol. 23v.
[15] CCB, fol. 5r.

the 1706 meeting of the London Association on the grounds that it admitted Seventh-Day and Arminian congregations. Beside these exceptional events, however, the book continues to record routine matters, such as the admission of new members, disciplinary measures, and decisions taken at Church meetings. The problem of an overlap between Church book and minute book, in other words, was never successfully resolved, as was perhaps not seen as a problem at all. From 1711 onward, the distinction became even more tenuous and the Church book seems to fuse with the minutes as most entries record the decisions taken at the monthly meetings.

Cripplegate, therefore, differs from other Churches whose records have survived in the way it experimented with the contents of its book and minutes. The existence of the minute book, I would suggest, is partly responsible from the transformation of the Church book, from May 1707 to May 1711, into a lengthy account of Cripplegate's proceedings against David Crosley, in which we find the correspondence between Cripplegate and its fallen pastor, and between Cripplegate and provincial Churches. The inclusion of epistles is certainly not unique in Church records, as we have seen in the case of recommendation letters; Michael Davies has recently drawn attention, in a pioneering essay, to the letters of the Bedford congregation (Davies 2009); Cripplegate, however, is unique in the way it preserved controversial letters for the best part of four years, transcribing them, amending them, and using them as legal documents in one of the biggest scandals to afflict the early eighteenth-century dissenting community.

4.2 David Crosley

Weakened by the separation of the former Horseleydown members, by the departure of Paine and its supporters together with Richard Claridge, Cripplegate was without a pastor between 1700 and 1703 when David Crosley was formally ordained, having been dismissed from Tottlebank, the congregation he ministered to in Yorkshire.

Crosley (1669-1744) was not an unwise choice for a large and ancient London congregation. Born in Heptonstall, near Todmorden, on the border of Yorkshire and Lancashire, he became a Baptist in 1692 and was baptized in the Worcestershire congregation of Bromsgrove. He then briefly settled in Barnoldswick before accepting the Tottlebank pastorate in February 1696, against the wishes of an association of local

Churches held in Barnoldswick (Whitley 1913, 77-80).[16] 'A name rich with blessed memories' (Lewis 1893, 4), Crosley is revered in Baptist historiography for his missionary travels throughout Northern England. From a base in the forest of Rossendale, he and his elder cousin William Mitchell established 'a loosely-organized circuit' of preaching stations which sometimes matured into gathered Baptist Churches (Blomfield 1912, 73). Whereas Mitchell was apparently content to operate in the North, and was indeed Tottlebank's first choice for a minister, Crosley's nature predisposed him to wanderings and he had already embarked on several preaching tours in the Midlands and the South of England before arriving in Cripplegate.[17]

There is no dearth of information about David Crosley, beginning with James Hargreaves who dedicated a long appendix to Crosley's works (Hargreaves 1816). Most of what we know about him, however, has not been revised since the early twentieth century, and either concentrates on the way the Northern Churches operated or is mainly biographical.[18] The story of David Crosley's most difficult moments, between 1708 and 1711, needs to be retold through the Cripplegate correspondence, not only for what it reveals about the man himself but also about the relationship between provincial and metropolitan congregations and the nature of the Baptist ministry.

I am here chiefly concerned with the letters to and from Crosley and provincial Churches preserved in Cripplegate's Church book. But David Crosley was a productive letter writer. None of his holograph letters seem to have survived although a representative sample were transcribed in the 1692 notebook together with those of his Rossendale friend John Moore, later minister at Northampton. Frederick Overend published an account of the Rossendale Churches based on seventeen letters taken from

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[16] For Crosley's adoption of Baptist views through the agency of 'one woman of any accompt', see 'The Copies of Some Christian Letters', Greater Manchester County Record Office, William Farrer Collection L1/43, fols [173-8]. Thereafter Notebook. The foliation is inferred. I am quoting from the manuscript rather than Frederick Overend's at times inaccurate transcription of Crosley's letters.

[17] See for instance, Notebook, fols [173-78, 181-82, 191-95].

[18] The main contemporary sources of information on Crosley's life are, James S. Hardman, 'David Crosley, the Pioneer Rossendale Baptist', in *Four Articles by James S. Hardman*, published for the Sion Baptist Church (Cloughfold, 1947), 3-13; Ian Sellers (ed.), *Our Heritage: The Baptists of Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire, 1647-1987* (Leeds: The Yorkshire Baptist Association and the Lancashire and Cheschire Baptist Association, 1987); B.A. Ramsbottom, *The Puritan Samson: The Life of David Crosley, 1669-1744* (Harpenden: Gospel Standard Trust, 1991); S.L. Copson, *Association Life of the Particular Baptists of Northern England, 1699-1732*, English Baptist Records 3 (Baptist Historical Society, 1991); M.F. Thomas, *Tottlebank Baptist Church, 1669-1699* (1999, privately printed); J. H. Y. Briggs, 'Crosley, David (1669/70–1744)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6790, accessed 28 April 2011].

Moore's manuscript (Overend 1912). This belonged to the Lancashire antiquarian William Farrer and was purchased from his widow by the Greater Manchester County Record Office, where it remains today. Item L1/43 in the ocean of Farrer's notes and papers, has not been examined since Overend. It comprises some 500 folios with unregistered letters to and from Mitchell and Crosley. When and where necessary to illuminate the Cripplegate events, I will therefore draw from the letters of the Moore manuscript while leaving a fuller study to appear elsewhere.

4.3 The Seventh Commandment

The honeymoon between Cripplegate and its provincial minister was short-lived. On 7 May 1708, at a Church meeting, four brothers were dispatched to 'search out ye Truth of ye scandalous reports on our Elder'.[19] A few months later, the Church opened proceedings against Crosley and transcribed them in the Church book under the title, 'A faithfull Narrative of the proceedings of severall Brethren, and of this Church of Jesus Christ—against Mr David Crosley, their late pastor, from the beginning of decemb: 1707 to the 14 of aug 1709'. It is here impossible to rehearse all the details of the proceedings, but I will concentrate on one especially scandalous charge against Crosley: his behaviour towards women.

Crosley was a heavy drinker, as the Church well knew, but when his excesses began to attract the attention of 'the Elders of the Baptized Churches with whom he had communion', some Cripplegate members thought it was time to take action.[20] Crosley was first heard and admonished privately by some 'Christian Brethren', before being brought before the whole Church. He repented, promised to amend and matters were dropped for a time, but he proved unable to remain sober. Excessive drinking was not, however, Crosley's only moral failure: when in his cups, he had apparently behaved 'immodestly' towards at least three women: the niece of one of the Church members named Hester Hannis, Susan Emerton (who sought a dismission in 1717) and an unidentified woman at The Three Daggers tavern. When Crosley was finally spotted in the company of a reputed prostitute, he invented a story to justify his dealings with the woman and, when exposed, had no choice but to confess his lies. Nonetheless, he never acknowledged that he had ever acted 'immodestly'. Crosley promptly returned to

[19] CCB, fol. 30v.
[20] CCB, fol. 32r.

Tottlebank, via Colne in Lancashire, leaving the Cripplegate elders to manage the final stages of the procedure *in absentia*. He was finally excommunicated for 'drunckeness', 'immodest behavior towards women, bordering on the breach of the 7th Commandment' and 'Lying'.[21] For the following two years, Crosley corresponded with Cripplegate to convince them to restore him and then dismiss him properly so that he could served in Tottlebank again.

No Baptist ignored what had to be done in cases of offences, for discipline was duly rehearsed in Church orders and practiced in monthly meetings. If the nature of the offence was private, the offender would be admonished privately, asked to answer the charges brought by at least two witnesses and matters would be dropped if repentance were deemed to be sincere (Renihan 2008, 56-57). In case of 'obstinacy', the case would be brought before the whole Church. The unrepentant offender could be suspended from communion in the first instance and failure to amend would result into excommunication. He or she could be 'restored' if their repentance was convincing.

Cripplegate was almost obsessively careful in respecting this procedure, believing it could 'affect all the Baptised Christians in citty and countrey' if it were seen either to act precipitately or to delay matters unduly.[22] Although Crosley was dealt with in the same way as any other offending brother or sister, his ministerial position rendered matters open to public scrutiny. As a result, every precaution was taken to gather evidence. For instance, in order to prove that Crosley had never visited a horse dealer on Tower Hill but was there solely on purpose of seeing a prostitute, Church members were despatched to the area with Crosley's letter in hand and 'went from dorr to dore & inquired of ye houskeepers of all ye houses in all ye passages on both sides of ye way'.[23] Witnesses were heard, carefully examined, and asked to depose verbally or in writing, under oath. One of them was the young Hester Hannis, the niece of Matthew Tindall. Hester's charges against Crosley amounted to two: first, 'kissing her immodestly several times', to which he answered that he 'might', when drunk, have kissed her 'longer, or harder then was vseuall'; second (which he entirely denied), 'unchast behavior'.[24] In a private meeting Hester

[21] CCB, fol. 36r.
[22] CCB, fol. 34r
[23] CCB, fol. 51r.
[24] CCB, fol. 33r.

> solemnly declare[d] that Br. Crosley did severall times behave himself very immodestly to her, in kissing her severall times, and taking her on his knee, and blowing out the Candle, with another wanton, Rude, behaviour, that her Moddesty would not suffer her to declare, to the said Brethren, nor otherways but when her vnckle asked her the question, she answered in the affermitive, and being asked by Br Adams, if she could take an oath, if called to it to what she had now affermed, her answer was she could doe it with a very safe Conscience.[25]

This has to be one of the most telling silences in Baptist records. We are left to imagine what *the* question was, a question asked by a close relative, and meant to elicit an answer without forcing Hester to name the facts.

And still, her testimony was judged insufficient in the absence of a second witness, and when confronted with her, Crosley confessed nothing. Two of Crosley's female supporters, Sister Hannah Wall and Sister Hurst, then cast aspersions upon Hannis's character:

> for thay accused [Hester Hannis], of being a drunckard, lyer, and theif, soe that it caused a great Clamour, and disorder, in the Church, and great Reflections one upon another, because some adheared to Hester Hannises accussaction, Rather then to Br Crosleys defence.[26]

At this stage, Cripplegate was clearly on the verge of splitting over Crosley. The Church would not reach a unanimous decision until a few weeks before his excommunication, when it could be proved beyond any doubt that he had lied to them.

Having failed to produce two witnesses or to secure a confession, Crosley's accusers were left to alter slightly the terms of the law and bring a series of women to corroborate Hester's sayings, which would amount to more than one witness, for 'Respecting Hester Hannis and considering the nature of the crime…it was very improbable, if not impossible, such an offence should have two wittnesses'.[27]

Both adultery and the absence of consent from Crosley's alleged victims were at issue here. All the other deponents whose narratives and letters were included in the Church book stressed (or were made to stress) the same point. Susan Emerton, for instance, testified that:

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[25] CCB, fol. 33r.
[26] CCB, fol. 33v.
[27] CCB, fol. 33r.

> when she was walking Mr Crosley came & had a little discours with her yt if she should be out of place att any time she should be welcome to his hous & kist her putting his tongue into her mouth wch put her much out of Countenance when ever she saw him.[28]

One Howell Jones was brought in to narrate what he had seen at The Three Daggers and again the question of consent was raised:

> that he being drinking at the 3 daggers was bid by the maid to observe a passage, soe he looked through a Chink, and saw Br Crosleys face, as close to a womans, as ever his was to his wife, with his armes about her waist, being both standing, afterwards, called for more drink and gave her, and put his hand about her neck, and the other as low as her waist, but saw no further act, only, the woman seemed to withdraw her self from him as being uneasey.[29]

A later account has a slightly different—and decisive—version of the last phrase: 'but I saw no immodesty acted'.[30] When Crosley was then observed on Tower Hill with a prostitute, he escaped north in the spring of 1709.

4.4 Letters and the law

Before examining how Crosley and Cripplegate conducted this second phase of their relationship, it is necessary to rehearse the status of the letters in the Church records, which points in opposite directions: a particular attention to the legal value of the written documents, combined with a lack of care in their transcription.

Letters in Church records are transcripts of originals and Cripplegate's correspondence is no exception. As we have seen, some of the letters the Church received were judged sufficiently important to be copied into the Church book or minute book, while others were not. It is not clear whether the originals were kept or destroyed, or who had the authority to decide. In the case of Cripplegate, given the extraordinary nature of the events, we have more information than usual on the fate of the letters: both Crosley and the Church had apparently agreed that the originals should be deposited with the deacons, as well as other written transactions, regarless of whether

[28] CCB, fols 49r, 48v.
[29] CCB, fol. 35r.
[30] CCB, fol. 48v.

they were included in the Church book.[31] Letter-keeping was not a codified role for deacons and it is therefore difficult to ascertain whether Cripplegate was simply improvising under pressure or whether deacons were always implicitly trusted as safe guardians of original documents, as they were trusted as safe guardians of the Church's money.

Cripplegate was paying attention to its letters. Originals were preserved, copies of important items were made, catalogues were compiled to make the collection searcheable as, for instance, a complete 'Index to the Following Transactions and Letters' compiled after 1711. It records the folios of 58 listed items, the dates of the letters, the identity of their senders and sometimes the place from which they were sent.[32] Despite this seeming care, the reliability of the Cripplegate correspondence is not to be taken for granted, given the nature of the records. First of all, for the whole duration of the controversy with Crosley, the Church book was abandoned, the congregation probably relying on the minute book only, in the absence of a pastor. From 1708 to 1711, therefore, the entries are not contemporary with the stories they tell. They were copied *a posteriori*, either from memory, from the originals in the deacons' possession, or were perhaps transcripts of transcripts if an item was copied first into the minute book.

Most letters are dated but it is impossible to determine when they were copied into the Church book. After the 'narrative' of the proceedings (necessarily compiled after August 1709), we find material in another hand relating to the year 1702, a second account of Crosley's ordination, several recommendation letters dated 1690, 1705 and 1708. The compilers (there are at least three different hands) first used the recto of the folios only, but added material onto the rectos, making it necessary to insert indications at the bottom of a page such as 'red now in page 47' or 'look now to page 49' not to interrupt one particular item.[33] Letters to and from Crosley and Tottlebank are intertwined with depositions that are mentioned, but not transcribed in full, in the narrative of the proceedings (Hester Hannis, Susan Emerton, Howell Jones…), resulting in different versions of the same testimonies.

[31] CCB, fol. 35v.
[32] CCB, fols 37r-37v.
[33] CCB, fols 46r, 48r.

Second, there is no evidence that the letters were recognized as having a particular generic identity. When dealing with letters in Church records, it is vital to keep in mind that they were documents embedded in the legal proceedings of a congregation, and valued as legal evidence. Crosley's letters were not judged to be different in nature from recommendation letters or spiritual letters but all functioned as 'transactions' of the Church to maintain order and displine. All had the same legal status, all were parts of the 'acts' of the Church, whether they recommended a brother, admonished another, supplemented an oral testimony or vindicated some charge. There is no indication, as the miscellaneous index shows, that they were given separate status among 'recommendations', 'accounts', 'narratives', 'depositions', 'answers', 'notes', even 'treatises'.[34]

Third, letters did not constitute a satisfactory mode of communication. Whether an applicant was giving a conversion narrative to be admitted into the Church, whether a member was admonished, answered charges or repented for an offence, the Church systematically gave primacy to the spoken word. Letters were seen, at best, as supplementary material, at worst as a testimony of the person's guilt, when his or her shame or stubborness prevented physical encounters. Crosley was well aware of this and he implicitely accused Cripplegate of forcing him to adopt an unsatisfactory mode of communication:

> With a very deep & penitential concern I write & desire these lines may be read & sedately weighed among you & I chuse this method (this opportunity) rather yn to be personally <present> because ye discomposure & sorrow wch now drink up my spirrit under ye consideration of ye manifold rebukes wch on a sudden like an armed man Come upon me...[35]

It is only out of 'duty' and 'necessity', when forced to seek a restoration from Cripplegate, that he would overcome his reluctance to write, '<a> sence of either of wronging my self or offending of you still keps my pen however now at last a sence of duty Edged with necessitie has made me resolve to lay my Case and heart open before you'.[36]

[34] CCB, fols 37r-37v.
[35] CCB, fol. 46r.
[36] CCB, fol. 64r.

Finally, the letters transcribed in the Church book bear the trace of the haste and carelessness of the transcribers. In the most severe cases, the records candidly acknowledge that they are but 'an Imperfect copy' and that some transcriptions are redundant: 'This letter is now by mistake twice Enterd'.[37] Whereas the 'narrative' had been written with the utmost care, some sentences in many letters do not make any sense at all. The folios were therefore corrected by another hand, trying to reddress the most basic mistakes (but not necessarily helping the modern reader): there are interlinear insertions when one or more words are missing, or a whole sentence needs to be rectified; deletions, corrections of the spelling and scribbled strips of paper secured by pins were even added in the middle of a folio when space was lacking for amendments. Somebody evidently thought that the Cripplegate letters were almost useless in their original state, if not plainly wrong, as a guide to the events and that the original scribes had failed in their duty of preservation.

Letters and Church records stood therefore in an uneasy relationship to one another, no doubt because of the multiplicity of versions: the original, the transcription in the minute book and the transcription in the Church book. Letters served as material proofs when a controversy arose but there is no evidence that their nature was recognized as different from that of other written transactions. Despite the seeming care taken to preserve the originals and transcribe their contents, and despite later efforts to amend and catalogued letters, what is recorded in the Church book was sometimes selected, sometimes transcribed in full, sometimes integrated in partial narratives, sometimes left with no commentary, testifying to an uncertainty over the precise status of the documents and a refusal to lessen the preeminence of the spoken word.

4.5 A wounded spirit?

David Crosley acknowledged his drinking and lying but not adultery, 'for there is nothing I more abominate, and abhor'.[38] Whether or not he was guilty is a moot point. The testimonies of the three London women, further reports of 'scandalous' behaviour in the North in 1719 and 1736 (Blomfield 1912, 87-86), and a letter mentioning how his engagement with a widow had been broken off because he was accused of taking

[37] CCB, fols 50r, fol. 51v.
[38] CCB, fol. 35v.

advantage of his charismatic preaching, point in the first direction.[39] On the other hand, the formulation of Cripplegate is cautious, '*bordering on the breach* of the seventh commandment' (my emphasis) and no consensus was ever reached as to the precise nature of Crosley's sexual offences. One of his chief accusers, the uncle of Hester Hannis, would later seek a dismission from Cripplegate, softened his accusations and acknowledged he had been 'taken with [Crosley]'s spirit as to ye Doctrines of ye gospell & wth his person as to ye loving free & pleasantness of his Conversation', although he remained convinced of his guilt.[40]

The historian's sole concerns are with the spiritual and practical arguments of the correspondence. Crosley's confession came with accusations of Cripplegate's 'ill nature'. They had been 'wrong in ye Management & Execution of things' and 'groundless Iealosies & Insinuations' had forced him to lie.[41] Such a course of action was incautious but Crosley curiously never altered it, constantly attacking the way his (public) excommunication had been mismanaged through the unnamed (personal) 'Iealosies' of his accusers. In the end, Crosley would recognize his excommunication as a proper act of the Church yet without ceasing to berate Cripplegate for its lack of charity:

> Tis true your proceedings wth me has very sencibly affected me and proved a burden very heavy to be born but since tis ye Act of a Church & of such a Church I have owned the Authority of Christ with you and not disputed as in many things I Iustly might but submitted as a poor sinner aught But now how is it that I have not so much as one line from you to Exhort comfort or support me or in ye least to pave the way for my restoration.[42]

Crosley adopted several strategies. He first mounted emotional epistolary defences, displaying the self-lacerating rhetoric of the penitent sinner which he knew might soften Cripplegate and encourage them to reverse their sentence. He compared himself to Job, Jonah and Jeremiah, using variations on Proverbs 18:14: 'yt I may not altogether sink in my spirit whom am your wounded distressed & Sorrowful Brother David Crosley', 'A wounded spirit who can bear DC'.[43] A broken man assailed by 'mallancholly' on the brink of 'Desparation'—but still a child of God—he asked for

[39] Notebook, fols [312-16].
[40] CCB, fol. 61v.
[41] CCB, fol. 63r.
[42] CCB, fol. 63v.
[43] CCB, fol. 46v.

prayers and pity instead of harsh rebukes.[44] Whether we choose to believe him or not, there is no doubt that Crosley had been afflicted early on with strong temptations, as testified in a letter he wrote, aged eighteen, to his cousin Mitchell, 'I left desolate & cannot deliver myself; & so fiercely doth my Souls adversaries many times assault me, that I am even overwhelmed thereby'[45] or, a few years later, to his friend John Moore, 'I rest a poor worm in my selfe, & sore distressed, troubled & afflicted in ye flesh'.[46]

Crosley was quick to suggest that the Tempter had taken advantage of his 'naturall disposition': 'o yea Enimies of souls & of my soul I am sure now he hath over come me'.[47] However, he was no less reluctant to lessen his own responsibility invoking, for instance, his 'laxness as to close attendance on study & private duty'[48] and the way he had underestimated the 'vast difference betwixt city and Countrye'.[49]

Guilty and yet a victim of men's prejudice, of Satan's snares, and of London's perverting influence, the pastor then turned away from spiritual suffering to practical compromises, still balancing the minutiae of Church government with impassioned rhetoric. Crosley believed it was his duty to give lessons in Apostolic government to his former Church: 'Under the severest discipline of ye primitives times none were kept yt I can remember in ye place of Pennitents under Censure above 3 years'.[50] He first suggested he could resign and 'retire among [his] old acquaintance in ye north whereby ye desire as well as want of ye people is great.' When that failed, he thought to obtain 'a discharge tho without recommendations'.[51]

Unable to convince Cripplegate that God had given him repentance or that he should be allowed to resign, Crosley argued that 'hard usage', excommunication and a refusal to restore him would prevent him from being 'serviceable' and 'usefull' elsewhere. By adopting an inflexible attitude, Cripplegate was not simply dealing unjustly with him: it endangered the spread of evangelisation of the Northern counties,

> Butt I should yett have sat still in silence and have wayted for your own Bowells to have moved the waters but that ye crys of ye people of God with

[44] CCB, fol. 53r.
[45] Notebook, fol. [97].
[46] Notebook, fol. [248].
[47] CCB, fol. 52v.
[48] CCB, fol. 56r.
[49] CCB, fol. 56r.
[50] CCB, fol. 64r.
[51] CCB, fols 46v, 48v.

> & about me here for & after ye Ordinances of Christ forces me I have Urged ye Circumstances I am in & begd them to cast their ey upon some other but they whollie decline it I have told them I greatly Hesitated whither ever I should engage in those sacred services any more but they will not Endure ye hearing of it. They are still at me to know what they can do to facilitate my regular dismission without which I am not willing to act I tell them I hope a little while will sattisfie them. they add a many hand at ye Churches door desirous of admision but are not willing to proceed till they se me first fixt.[52]

For all its subtle balance of technicalities ('facilitate a regular dismission', 'proceed', 'fixt') and feelings ('Bowels', 'ye Crys of ye people of God', 'Endure'), Crosley's prose again failed to move Cripplegate. In 1736, among a series of 'Christian councels', Crosley warned his readers against the perils of keeping company with swearers, unjust dealers and drunkards, but also 'censorious' and 'uncharitable' people, reminiscent of his Cripplegate accusers: 'no Relation or Tye so sacred, but they will violate it; no Person or Office so publick or useful but they will readily expose both to gratify their own pevish and censorious Humour; as if their own Reputation and Interest never rose so high or stood so firm, as when founded on the Ruins of another'.[53] This is how David Crosley still felt some thirty years after leaving London.

Cripplegate had not been entirely insensitive to Crosley's arguments. Their first letter to Tottlebank was meant to inform them that Crosley had been cast out, 'till God give him repentance', but without mentioning the specific charges, using instead what they called 'Generall terms'.[54] Unconvinced by Crosley's defence, they could not endanger London for Yorkshire, 'we dare not revert ye Order of ye Gospell here for the sake of ye Gospell in your parts'.[55] Tottlebank was less than satisfied and the Church embarked on a series of vitricolic epistles, considered 'plain abuse' by Cripplegate, to press the latter to dismiss their pastor.

The exchanges between Crosley and Cripplegate and between Cripplegate and Tottlebank reveal the special relationships between a pastor and his congregations and, beyond, different conceptions of the nature of the ministry. After Crosley's departure to

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[52] CCB, fol. 64r.
[53] 'Plain and Honest Directions, and Christian Counsels', in N.T., *The Old Man's Legacy to his Daughters* (1736), 91.
[54] CCB, fol. 36v.
[55] CCB, fol. 66v.

London, Tottlebank had continued to feel, wrongly according to Cripplegate, that they 'caried a supposed prior right and Interest'[56]:

> His work should have <inspired you with> more Candor & tenderness to<ward> him in ye day of his rebuke suffer us to ~~tell~~ represent <to> you ye barbarity of yt part of yor conduct even as <it were> tearing our pastor as we esteemed him out of our bosom & slaying him you know wt sence before our eyes & while you ~~would~~ could not hinder Iust providence from making restitution in returning him to us again yet wod continue ye proofs of yor ill nature in making him as uncapeble as possibly you could be being <either> Comfortable or usefull among us.[57]

For Cripplegate, such accusation of 'barbarity' was no mere rhetorical hyperbole. Tottlebank implied that they had called David Crosley without respecting the proper procedure. And again, letters would serve as evidence of the legality of Cripplegate's conduct:

> if our Conduct in our first calling him was not right it is chargable on him and not on us for our first request was to know his state and brother crosely positively assarted his free state from those ~~of~~ gospel bonds or tys that might hinder his remove ye letters we have carefully preserved and afterwards he declared ye same before many elders and eminant Christian that left no rome for us to suspect ye truth thereof.[58]

For Crosley and his friends in Tottlebank, human weakness was a spiritual advantage, Crosley being more able to cure wounded souls, having himself experienced strong temptations. Pastoral letters to various correspondents in the Moore manuscript confirm this point. Tottlebank did not entirely disculpate Crosley but the Church was convinced that his letters, as well his sermons, displayed the proper repentance of a broken sinner:

> for our part we went only to represent wt we have gathered ~~to~~ <from> his ~~sermonces~~ <sermons & particularly> from his private discourses Littrs & espeacially to those whom he was more intimate with <wherein> he as told us ~~the means~~ of his nature wt strugles he had with ye body of sin how hard set he was to bear up agst ye stream of corruption & temptatiom & wt fear he had least ye enimies <should> prevaile this & much more we met with from him yet for all this we are not ashmd to say we Loved him not ye

[56] CCB, fol. 57r.
[57] CCB, fol. 54r.
[58] CCB, fols 56v-57r.

> worse <for it> becawse he better knew <himselfe &> how to humble himselfe & how to spake to others so as to be ye more usefull.[59]

Telling of his nature, his struggles, his fears, his stream of temptations was precisely what Crosley had done, to no avail, in his letters to Cripplegate but the smaller, Northern, community spoke of 'love' instead of procedures, of intimate exchanges with friends, instead of public epistolary vindications.

Finally, the success of a minister was measured less according to his moral conduct than according to his usufulness in making converts in the 'interest of religion'.[60] As a consequence, the ability of a congregation to maintain his minister, which depended on the size and wealth of its members, was judged to be of God's ordering. When, in 1710, Cripplegate poached Joseph Matthew from Grittleton (although he was not ordained after three years of trial), the small congregation consented to let him go on the grounds that they were too few and too mean to retain him, thereby signing a warrant for their own disappearance. Keeping him would have been a 'dishonour to god & a blot to o[u]r holy profession', they wrote to Cripplegate.[61] The economic argument was subservient to the godly design that directed a minister where his efforts would be rewarded by an increase in the community. Crosley himself repeatedly put this into practice: in 1695, he accepted the pastorate at Tottlebank against the advice of an association of Churches; in 1736 he was accused of maintaining an 'irregular way to increase his members…by all the artifices he can use' (letter of John Marshall quoted in Whitley 1913, 95). Where conversion was at stake, Crosley never hesitated to put the spiritual interest of sinners first.

According to this numerical logic, Crosley had many an advantage. Even Cripplegate recognized that the congregation had flourished under his pastorate. He was not, however, simply a gifted evangelizer, but a minister deeply concerned with proper Church government. Long before he settled in London, his cousin Mitchell had asked him to pronounce over issues of discipline.[62] In 'Christian Exhortation to Church-Fellowship', transcribed in the Moore manuscript, he defines his ministerial mission as feeding the neighbouring people 'sound Doctrine' and 'endeavour[ing] to promote

[59] CCB, fol. 59r.
[60] CCB, fol. 53v.
[61] CCB, fol. 60v.
[62] Notebook, fols [437-40].

amongst you such a Gospel-Order & Christian Fellowship as may most tend to your furtherance in ye Gospel'.[63] Even the most incisive commentators, such as Murdina MacDonald, have failed to realize that the ordination by the laying-on of hands of neighbouring London ministers was proposed to Cripplegate by Crosley himself, a 'method' of ordination he was keen to promote: 'the method proposed by Br Crosly and agreed to by the Elders (viz) Br Adams Br Pigot & Br Stennet in ye ordination of Br Crosley feb 12 702'.[64] The picture of William Mitchell as the steady builder of Churches and of David Crosley as the 'rolling stone' or 'erratic individual' of their evangelical partnership (Hayden 2005, 102; Blomfield 1912, 78) should be nuanced in the light of Crosley's never failing interest in Church government.

For Tottlebank condemning Crosley to forsake his ministry ran counter to the will of God, because of his pastoral success and the necessity to evangelize the North, many hands beeing at 'ye Churches door'. For Cripplegate, Crosley's lack of repentance was unacceptable and prevented his restoration and proper dismission. The nature of his offence, as often in cases of excommunications, mattered less than his obstinacy. None of the parties would ever reconcile.

Conclusion

The Cripplegate correspondence contains one of the best-documented scandals among early eighteenth-century gathered Churches and yet the formal relationship between letters and Church records had never been examined. Replacing the dissenting letters among their legal context alert us to the fact that epistolary exchanges could as readily sever the network of Churches as reinforced them. A vital element in the 'organizational response' of nonconformity to both persecution and toleration, as Richard Greaves termed it several decade ago (Greaves 1975), letters could also initiate and fuel controversies over Church government never to be healed. I have barely scratched the surface of David Crosley's extraordinary career: the way his printed works interacted with his correspondence or the richness of the Moore manuscript. Yet the exchanges preserved at Cripplegate illustrate Baptist Church life in several ways: the solution adopted in disciplinary cases when the nature of the offence was such that two witnesses could not be found (and when those witnesses were women), the inquisitorial

[63] Notebook, fols [238-44].
[64] CCB, fol. 38r.

proceedings of Churches that functioned as ecclesiastical tribunals whose legitimacy could be challenged by the accused, the uneasy relationships between London and the North, the emotional ties that were maintained despite ministerial wanderings, the role of the deacons as keepers of the manuscripts. Historians have persistently drawn a discreet veil over the Cripplegate events, and the way they were told in letters. Either the excommunication of David Crosley was considered too embarrassing to be retold, too specific to be of any interest, or too unclear to deserve comments. This has prevented commentators not only from tapping the rich vein of the Cripplegate records but also from realising that among post-Toleration Baptist ministers the figure of Crosley looms even larger than expected. Far from being a 'practical' Antinomian whose contempt of the moral law brought shame to a community (Whitley 1913, 109; MacDonald 1982, 119; Toon 1967, 152), Crosley was a gifted writer and a daring minister, questioning and challenging many aspects of Church discipline without straying from mainstream Calvinism. He was not once accused of doctrinal errings even by his worst enemies. In the course of a reassement of Crosley's career, it is worth paying attention to Hester Hannis's confession, to Susan Emerton's expressions of disgust, to Crosley's blatant lies, to Cripplegate's 'barbarity' and to Tottlebank's abuses. This means going back to Wheeler Robinson's 'anthropology' and to the Baptist Church records, not only for the evidence they yield about Church life but also for what they reveal about early eighteenth-century manuscript culture: their carefully worded narratives, their writing of history, their legal rhetoric balanced with the emotional charge of their epistolary exchanges.

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