

BIBLICAL CHURCH DISCIPLINE IN HISTORICAL
BAPTIST ECCLESIOLOGY

A Paper

Presented to

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Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the requirements for BPTST 3203

by

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January 16, 2007

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BIBLICAL CHURCH DISCIPLINE IN HISTORICAL BAPTIST ECCLESIOLOGY

Introduction

Emerging from the intense reform movements of the early seventeenth century, Baptists have traditionally aimed at conforming themselves to the apostolic model of the church laid forth in the New Testament. Yielding themselves to the Scriptures meant to be always reforming that which had yet to be taken captive unto the obedience of Christ. The practice of church discipline is one of the instruments they saw not only demanded by Christ in the Bible, but used by God to cleanse and preserve His covenant bride. For Baptists, this corrective discipline was used for bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God (cf. 2 Cor 7:1). Although this practice was formerly executed on a monthly basis, it is now seemingly absent from the contemporary Baptist church and her vocabulary. Its restoration is long needed, for the sake of Christ and the testimony of the triumph of God's omnipotent grace that made a people who were once not His people, His people. This paper will confirm the biblical basis for the practice of church discipline, observe its historical execution amongst Baptists, and apply its ecclesiological benefits to contemporary Baptist life.

Biblical Basis for the Practice of Church Discipline

The Baptists' historical commitment to a supreme view of Scripture has brought great opposition to traditionalism. Rather than appealing to the church fathers, as did some of the early sixteenth century renaissance humanists, or adapting to the state-

church as did some of the other reformers, Baptists have left a legacy with their gladsome appeal to the holy Word of God.¹ The Bible has shaped their doctrine and ecclesiology. Thus, it is fitting this essay reflects the same devotion to what the Scriptures teach concerning church discipline.

The Biblical View of the Church

Before one can fully understand church discipline, he must first have an appropriate comprehension of the nature of a church, both theologically and ecclesiology. A church is a community of people who, having been reconciled to God and to each other through the person and work of Jesus Christ, repeatedly assemble for edification in the service and work of the ministry (Heb 10:24-25; cf. Eph 4:12). This assembly consists of baptized believers who have been set apart for God by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that the manifestation of His grace, love, righteousness, and strength might be displayed to the world in the gospel, both in word and deed (Jas 1:22). Since these things describe a church, there is a great demand for obedience to Christ and His word, resulting in the purification of Christ's own possession that they might be set apart from the world. The church is to hunger for righteousness (Matt 5:6), purify their hearts (Jas 4:8), pursue sanctification (Heb 12:14), support the truth (1 Tim 3:15), abide in holiness (1 Thess 4:4), and maintain unity (Eph 4:3). She is not to be conformed to this world (Rom 12:2), nor to have fellowship with the darkness (1 John 1:6), and is to abstain from every form of evil (1 Thess 5:22). If she is not carrying out these disciplines, she is not putting on the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 13:14), and thus

¹L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible: The Baptist Doctrines of Biblical Inspiration and Religious Authority in Historical Perspective* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 15-22.

testifying falsely about the holiness of her Father (1 Pet 1:15-16), the freedom from sin bought by His Son (Rom 6:22; Gal 5:13), the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (2 Thess 2:13), and the gospel that rescues her from this present evil age (Gal 1:4). To see the church succeed in these disciplines, the Lord has given her particular instruction in His word for the exercise of discipline upon members with wayward hearts or those practicing what the Law of Christ forbids. Corrective church discipline is directly concerned with motivating the people to maintain their cause in pure devotion to Christ.²

The Biblical Basis for Church Discipline

The first place in the NT that corrective church discipline appears is in the Gospel according to Matthew. Following the parable of 18:10-14, which displays the concern, care, and urgency of the shepherd in finding lost sheep, Jesus provides instruction for His disciples in restoring erring members of the flock, i.e. the church (18:15-20). It is within these instructions of Jesus that Matthew has provided his readers with a model of how church discipline should be practiced. Jesus taught,

¹⁵So if your brother sins against you, go reprove him, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶But if he does not listen, take along with you one or two others, in order that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every charge may be established. ¹⁷Now if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as the Gentile and the tax collector. ¹⁸Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three have been gathered for my name, there am I in their midst (Matt 18:15-20; author's translation).

²G. Uhlhorn, "Church Discipline," in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952), 86.

In v. 15, Jesus teaches that if a brother sins against another, he is to be privately confronted by the offended party so that the offender might be led to repentance. This is what it means to “gain” the brother. If this first confrontation results in no repentance, one or two more witnesses are to accompany the offended party in addressing the offender a second time (v. 16). Together, their actions are also in hope that the offender will be restored. In case the accused brother remains in his rebellion after the second private confrontation, the matter is then to be brought before the church. Upon his refusal to heed the church’s instruction, he is then to be treated as a Gentile (i.e. an unregenerate individual) and tax collector (i.e. an untrustworthy outsider) (v. 17).

This text contains several aspects that are crucial for understanding the practice of church discipline. First, discipline is for the good of the brother who has sinned. Not only is it used to expose his wrongdoing, but also for the encouragement of his repentance, and thus his sanctification. The aim of such confrontation is to help the individual rid himself of sin instead of passively allowing him to remain in it. Second, it is to maintain the purity of the church in so far as it removes those who are not bearing the fruit of regeneration, namely repentance (Luke 3:8-9). Christians repent. Third, it shows the corporate responsibility the individual members have for one another. There is accountability when the members of a church are addressing each other’s sins and observing a life of repentance, or lack thereof. Not only is the believer bound to Christ, and so must bear the fruit of the True Vine (John 15:2), but he is also bound to Christ’s body (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:27), and so must be eager to maintain unity by confessing sin (cf. Eph 4:1-3; Jas 5:19-20). Fourth, it displays the authority of the local assembly granted by Christ for the exercising of discipline upon its members. The implication of v.

17 is that members are to submit to the jurisdiction of the entire local assembly. They have been entrusted with the power to conclude that unrepentance demonstrates the true nature of an individual's heart, that is, it is not changed and thus is like a pagan Gentile or tax collector. Such authority is further confirmed in v. 18 where Jesus points out the church's power both to bind (i.e. to punish by restrictive measures) and to loose (i.e. to liberate with pardoning measures).

The letters of the apostle Paul are the second place in the NT where church discipline is encouraged, even enforced. Paul teaches this corrective discipline to the local believing communities in the same manner Jesus did. Matthew 18 demonstrated that the aim of church discipline was the restoration of a brother, though if necessary, the removal of the unrepentant. Paul also sees the main point of church discipline as remedial rather than merely punitive.³

The four observations made above concerning Matthew 18:15-20, are also found in Paul's writings. First, church discipline is for the sinner's good, being used as a means to lead him to repentance. Paul instructs Titus to warn those who are divisive in hope of their repentance (Titus 3:10). The Thessalonians are to warn those who fail to heed his words, but are to do so "as a brother" (2 Thess 3:15). Those who are caught in transgression are to be restored with gentleness (Gal 6:1). Others are even to be handed over to Satan *so that* they may learn not to blaspheme (1 Tim 1:18-20), or *so that* their spirit may be saved (1 Cor 5:5). Clearly, discipline's aim is saving, not condemning. Second, Paul shows that corrective discipline is directly tied to maintaining the purity of the church. The church is to have nothing more to do with those who persist in stirring up

³T. E. Schmidt, "Discipline," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 216.

division (Titus 3:10-11), and they are to keep away from any brother who walks in idleness (2 Thess 3:6-15). In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul demands that they purge the leaven (i.e. the immorality) from the church in Corinth, that their ways do not give false testimony of Christ's sacrifice (1 Cor 5:1-13). The outward display of the church's purity is tied directly to the actions of its members. Third, Paul's instructions concerning church discipline display corporate responsibility. Timothy is told "not to admit a charge against any elder without the evidence of two or three witnesses" (1 Tim 5:19; cf. 2 Cor 13:1). Those "who are spiritual" are to restore their brothers (Gal 6:1). Paul appeals to Roman believers "to watch out for those who cause divisions" (Rom 16:17), to the Corinthians to not even eat with any "so-called brother if he is an immoral person" (1 Cor 5:11), and to the Thessalonians to admonish those not obeying the apostolic instruction (2 Thess 3:15). Each member of the local body is responsible to call others to repentance and make evident, even by disassociation, that which is sinful and godless. Fourth, Paul assumes the local assembly is aware of its authority in corrective discipline. This is demonstrated when Paul expects the Corinthian believers to deliver the immoral man over to Satan when they are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus (1 Cor 5:4). The assumption is that together they have the authority to dismiss him from the assembly for his unrepentant lifestyle. This authority of the local body and the subjection of its members to each other are also implied in his words to other churches (e.g. Rom 16:17; Gal 1:8f; 2 Thess 3:14-15; Titus 3:10).

Although Paul's epistles are filled with instruction pertaining to church discipline, the remainder of the NT epistles is sparse on the issue, directly. The instructions that are mentioned, however, are worth noting as the third place of support.

For instance, James tells the church to confess their sins to one another and encourages the members to turn their brothers from the errors of their ways (Jas 5:19-20). He demonstrates a need for corporate responsibility and that confrontation is for the good of those in sin. John also gives an example of corporate responsibility in the body (1 John 5:16), even calling attention to the wicked deeds of a particular member for not abiding by the apostolic word (3 John 9-11). Their words are few concerning church discipline, even limiting them to aspects of it, but their unity with Paul and Jesus is unmistakable.

It is evident that Jesus, Paul, James, and John instruct the church to exercise corrective discipline upon her members. It is to be practiced for the sake of purifying the church from sin, and rescuing wayward saints that they might be restored to the assembly. In so doing, the church will rightly testify of her identity as the people of God, in the world, yet set apart from the world, to be a visible testimony of God's holiness.

The Biblical Definition for Church Discipline

Church discipline, therefore, can be biblically defined as the practice of the local assembly of believers whereby they exercise a form of corrective discipline which intends to preserve the purity of the church and promote the spiritual welfare of its members,⁴ that Christ might be magnified in His body, who is in the world but not of it. This definition will be of great use when observing the history of how Baptists, in their pursuit to conform to the NT pattern, practiced this means of sanctification in the church.

Historical Execution of Church Discipline by Baptists

⁴Floyd Patterson, "Discipline," in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1958), 365.

Anabaptists

Born out of the so-called “radical”⁵ side of the Protestant Reformation were the Anabaptists. This sect of reformers did not merely want a reform of the existing church, but wanted a reinstatement of the NT church. They thoroughly disagreed with those reformers who saw the church and state as one in bringing reform to the whole society. If society were to be reformed, it would be done through Christianized societies, that is, local groups of disciplined believers.⁶ Such a conviction was partly derived from their observations of magisterial leniency that permitted much impurity Christ’s church would forbid.⁷ Martin Bucer (1491-1551), the leading reformer in Strassburg, Germany, who had a great influence on Calvinist ecclesiology, believed the Anabaptists were right in their observations. As a result, even Bucer concluded that the church needed a third mark,⁸ namely church discipline.⁹ Though Bucer was not a part of the Anabaptist movement, he saw that their concerns for discipline were biblically warranted.

⁵George H. Williams, ed., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 22.

⁶William G. Travis, “The SBJT Forum: Perspectives on Church Discipline,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 8 (Winter, 2000): 85.

⁷Josef Ludwig, “The Relationship Between Sanctification and Church Discipline in Early Anabaptism,” *Evangelical Journal* 14 (Fall 1996): 80; Glenn S. Sunshine, “Discipline as the Third Mark of the Church: Three Views,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 33 N (1998): 473.

⁸Bucer understands the first and second marks to be those proposed by John Calvin, namely, the ministry of the Word and the ministry of the Sacraments (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.1.9-13, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20-21 [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960], 1023-1028).

⁹Sunshine, “Discipline as the Third Mark of the Church,” 473.

These radical reformers, though not well received by the other Reformers, continued to push for their views of the church and the discipline of its members.¹⁰ Conrad Grebel (ca. 1498-1526), often referred to as the father of Anabaptists, together with the Swiss Brethren wrote to Thomas Müntzer (ca. 1489-1529), exhorting him to “press forward with the Word and create a Christian church with the help of Christ and His Rule as we find it instituted in Matthew 18 and practiced in the epistles.”¹¹ In response to antinomian tendencies arising in some of the Anabaptist congregations, Michael Sattler (ca. 1495-1527) and other Swiss Brethren composed Seven Articles, known as the *Schleitheim Confession* (1527), demonstrating the importance of a disciplined community.¹² Article two affirms the employment of “the ban,” which was the final step observed in Matthew 18:15-17. Article three speaks of excluding those members whose works are dead from partaking in the Lord’s Supper. The fourth article demands separation from the world and its evil, and the sixth speaks of members warning the one who sinned and commanding him to sin no more.¹³ In another set of articles titled, *Discipline of the Church, How a Christian Ought to Live* (1527),¹⁴ the evidence

¹⁰The following historical observations of Anabaptist church discipline largely follow the outline found in James Leo Garret, Jr., *Baptist Church Discipline* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1962), 10-12.

¹¹“Letters to Thomas Müntzer from the Swiss Brethren, Conrad Grebel and Others” (September 5, 1524), in *Anabaptist Beginnings (1523-1533), A Source Book*, ed. William R. Estep, Jr., Bibliotheca Humanistica & Reformatorica, vol. 16 (Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1976), 35.

¹²William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1959), 22-23.

¹³Articles 4, 6 in *The Schleitheim Confession* (1527), in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 25-27.

¹⁴*Discipline of the Church, how a Christian ought to Live* (1527), in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 32-35.

that Anabaptists considered church discipline part of their fundamental beliefs is clear. Twelve articles spell out the essentials in correcting a brother or sister.

Other significant leaders in the Anabaptist movement also argued for church discipline. A powerful preacher¹⁵ named Balthasar Hübmaier (1480-1528) wrote a document entitled, *Of Fraternal Punishment* (1527). In it he writes that without fraternal punishment (i.e. church discipline according to Matthew 18), “it is impossible for things to go aright and stand well among Christians on earth.”¹⁶ He even goes so far as to say that baptism and the Lord’s Supper are “vain and pointless where fraternal punishment and Christian excommunication do not exist.”¹⁷ After expressing his convictions of such necessary punishment, he then proceeds to give practical advice on how it is to be administered according to the words of Christ.¹⁸

Menno Simons (ca. 1496-1561), the Dutch Anabaptist Reformer, also taught on church discipline in his work, *On the Ban: Questions and Answers* (1550). According to Simons, the ban is a command taught in the Scriptures, is necessary for obedience sake to implement, and is to be administered according to Christ’s words in Matthew 18.¹⁹ The *Waterland Confession* (1580) and the *Dordrecht Confession* (1632), two influential

¹⁵Bush and Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible*, 13.

¹⁶Balthasar Hübmaier, “Of Fraternal Punishment” (1527), vol. 1 of *The Writings of Balthasar Hübmaier*, collected and photog. W. O. Lewis, trans. G. D. Davidson (Liberty: Typescript, 1939), 332.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 333.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 340-345.

¹⁹Menno Simons, “On the Ban: Questions and Answers” (1550), in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. George Huntston Williams and Angel M. Mergal (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 263, 265, 270.

Mennonite confessions, both reflect the same convictions as Simons concerning the ban and other practices of church discipline.²⁰

From these observations, it is obvious that the Anabaptists, in their passions to conform themselves to the NT church pattern, supported and practiced church discipline. It was not their passion to expel members from the church, but to be obedient to Christ's word. If preserving a wayward brother or maintaining a pure fellowship meant removing those practicing evil, then so be it for the sake of Christ's name.

English Baptists

The English Baptists, though unlike the Anabaptists of Europe in many ways, did most assuredly have one thing in common with them; namely, the Scriptures are supreme and sufficient for all doctrine and practice.²¹ In the same manner the Anabaptists allowed Scripture to guide their views on church discipline, so too did the English Baptists. Corrective discipline was not invented by them, but by Christ, and therefore demanded obedience and conformity to it.

English Baptists found themselves agreeing on things such as the authority of Scripture, the necessity for regeneration prior to baptism, and the independence and autonomy of local churches. However, they were divided when it came to the issue of the atonement. Those who held to a universal, or general, atonement of Christ were referred to as General Baptists. Those holding that Christ's atonement only extended to His elect

²⁰Article 35 in *The Waterland Confession* (1580); Articles 16, 17 in *The Dordrecht Confession* (1632), in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 62-63, 76-77.

²¹Bush and Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible*, 26. I am aware of the various views of Baptist origins, some scholars supporting an Anabaptist influence and others a growth out of English Separatism (e.g. H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987], 49-63). For the purposes of this essay, however, it is only necessary that their similarities be noted; specifically, the authority of scripture in its teachings regarding the practice of church discipline.

were considered Particular Baptists. Both General and Particular Baptists practiced discipline in the eighteenth century.²² Though their confessions clearly differ from each other on the extent of the atonement, they do reflect a common belief in the discipline of their members.

Making way for the General Baptists were the Separatist beliefs of John Smyth (1570-1612) and Thomas Helwys (1550-1616), both of whose influence marked the beginning of Baptist roots. In a short, private confession of faith, written to help the Mennonite fellowship in Waterland,²³ Smyth professed that the church had the power of Christ to excommunicate.²⁴ As his beliefs developed, he wrote a more extensive work in response to Helwys and his followers who disagreed with Smyth for forsaking his Baptist convictions and rejoining the Mennonites. It is titled, *A Short Confession of Faith* (1610). Again, in article thirty-three he affirms excommunication of those who persist in “sins known to themselves after the third warning.”²⁵

Those who did not follow Smyth in joining the Mennonites followed Helwys who also prepared confessions of faith for the church. Contained in articles sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen of *A Declaration of Faith of English People* (1611) are statements related to corporate responsibility and the authority of the church to encourage holiness through discipline. The “Church or Congregation,” he says, “ought to knowe one another, that so they may performe all the duties off love towards another, both to soule

²²McBeth, *Baptist Heritage*, 168-169.

²³Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 99.

²⁴Article 13 in *Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles by John Smyth* (1610), in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 101.

²⁵Article 33 in *A Short Confession of Faith* (1610), in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 110.

and bodie.”²⁶ Amazingly, Helwys then sights Matthew 18:15 for support. In other words, it is loving not merely to know them, but to exercise discipline so that sin does not prevail in their lives.

Particular Baptists also taught their congregations about discipline. Using the forty-five articles of the English Separatist’s statement of faith, *A True Confession* (1596), seven Particular Baptist churches gathered in London to write the *London Confession* (1644).²⁷ In articles forty-two and forty-three, they affirm that Christ has “given power to his whole Church to receive in and cast out, by way of Excommunication, any member.”²⁸ The *Standard Confession* (1660) expresses Paul’s teaching when it states in article twenty-seven,

That the true Church of Christ, ought after the first and second admonition, to reject all Hereticks, and in the name of the Lord to withdraw from all such, as profess the way of the Lord, but walks disorderly in their conversations, or any wayes causes divisions or offences, contrary to the Doctrine (of Christ) which they have learned.²⁹

Another confession of Particulars, the *Second London* (1679) reiterates much of what both of these affirm in matters of discipline.

Benjamin Keach (1640-1704) is a primary example of Particular Baptist beliefs about the community of faith, the local body, and how they function together in bringing glory to Christ. In his work, *The Glory of a True Church, and its Discipline Display’d* (1697), he speaks of the members’ responsibility to one another. They would

²⁶Article 16 in *A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland* (1611), in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 121.

²⁷Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 81.

²⁸Article 42 in *London Confession* (1644), in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 168.

²⁹Article 27 in *The Standard Confession* (1660), Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 230.

“by mutual agreement consent to give themselves up to the Lord, and to one another, according to the Will of God.”³⁰ This meant that believers were to “walk in Fellowship of the particular Congregation, and submit themselves to the Care and Discipline thereof.”³¹ Concerning the direct exercise of discipline, he believed that churches were to set aside one day a month for disciplinary matters.³² To aid in his congregations handling of those disciplinary matters, he goes on to provide practical pastoral advice on topics like, “of church sensors,” “of private offenses,” “of scandalous persons,” “of dealing with hereticks and blasphemers,” or “of such that cause divisions.”³³ Keach is consistent in his approach to corrective discipline and provides his readers with footnotes filled with Scripture citations that they too might observe these are his best efforts of explaining what Christ and the apostles taught.

After briefly reflecting on what was taught by both General and Particular Baptists in England, it is clear that church discipline was incorporated in their teachings. Their common confessions, written to help the local congregations, give great testimony to its nature, practice, and biblical warrant. In the words of Keach, “That which Primarily tends to the Glory of a *Church* is the Foundation on which it is Built, which is Jesus

³⁰Benjamin Keach, “The Glory of a True Church and its Discipline Display’d” (1697), in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington: Nine Marks Ministries, 2001), 64.

³¹Ibid., 65.

³²Ibid., 70. Keach makes sure to note that this should not be done on the “Lord’s Day.”

³³Ibid., 71-84.

Christ.”³⁴ If so, the members of that church are “to warn, rebuke, and admonish one another with Meekness according to the Rules left to us of Christ.”³⁵

American Baptists

American Baptists emerged from the influence of English Baptists, both Generals and Particulars, who eventually moved into the colonies and established churches.³⁶ Baptists in America were therefore similar to those coming from England in many respects. They too aimed at conforming themselves to the NT pattern, holding to a high view of Scripture, an autonomous church, believer’s baptism, and a disciplined body. This last common denominator was considered a crucial means of preserving the church and testifying to the gospel of Christ in Colonial America.

Several Baptist ministers contributed to this instrument of preservation. Benjamin Griffith (1688-1768), a Baptist minister heavily influenced by the Puritans, wrote *A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church* (1743) which was added as an appendix to the *Philadelphia Confession* (1742).³⁷ He gives advice for a disciplined way of admitting church members, making sure they are genuine Christians bearing the fruits of repentance.³⁸ On church censures, he explains that the churches duty is threefold upon offenders: (1) admonition, which is a private confrontation concerning

³⁴Ibid., 84.

³⁵Ibid., 90.

³⁶McBeth, *Baptist Heritage*, 123-150.

³⁷Gregory A. Wills, “The Church: Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington: Nine Marks Ministries, 2001), 36.

³⁸Benjamin Griffith, “A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church” (1743), in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington: Nine Marks Ministries, 2001), 103-104.

a brother's sin; (2) suspension, which is like a temporary ban from the Lord's table if there is not enough evidence to immediately convict someone; and (3) excommunication, which is when a member will hear no reproof.³⁹

Samuel Jones (1735-1814), an able Baptist writer, later penned a new manual of church polity for the Philadelphia Association entitled, *Treatise of Church Discipline* (1805). This revision replaced Griffiths as the association's manual of discipline.⁴⁰ Of all the polity manuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, church historian Gregory A. Wills writes, "Jones's most nearly represents the common sentiments and practices of the Baptist churches in America."⁴¹ Concerning corporate responsibility Jones concluded that members of a local congregation are united "by an act of mutual confederation" in "gospel fellowship."⁴² He also notes that the church's authority comes from Christ who holds the legislative power, yet committed the executive power to His body.⁴³ The remainder of this treatise proves Jones and Griffith to be in agreement on matters of order and discipline.

Though these two men are representative of Baptist work in the north, the Baptist south shows very little change with respect to church discipline practices. John L. Dagg (1794-1884), whose *Manual of Theology* (1857) became quite a popular item

³⁹Ibid., 105-106.

⁴⁰Garret, *Baptist Church Discipline*, 16.

⁴¹Wills, "The Church," 38.

⁴²Samuel L. Jones, "A Treatise of Church Discipline and a Directory" (1805), in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington: Nine Marks Ministries, 2001), 140-141.

⁴³Ibid., 142.

amongst Southern Baptists, also wrote extensively on church discipline.⁴⁴ In his other major work, *Church Order: A Treatise* (1858), he examines baptism, the church, the Lord's Supper, public worship, and discipline in light of obedience to Christ. "Love to God," Dagg writes, "produces obedience."⁴⁵ For this reason, believers are to join together as one body in the practice of discipline. Commenting on First Corinthians 5:5, Dagg considered that the "happy result" of excommunication ought to encourage discipline amongst believers, instead of causing them to shun it.⁴⁶

One of the most influential documents in the south was that put out by the Charleston Baptist Association, *Summary of Church Discipline* (1774). Though it differs from Griffith's *Short Treatise* on several matters,⁴⁷ the Summary demonstrates that the Baptist south incorporated church discipline as well. Other influential men who carried this apostolic tradition of the church in the Baptist South were: William B. Johnson (1792-1863), the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and author of the *Gospel Developed* (1846); James L. Reynolds (1812-1877), who wrote *Church Polity* in 1849; and P. H. Mell (1814-1888), also a former president of the SBC and author of *Corrective Church Discipline* (1860).⁴⁸

Historically speaking, the American Baptists have also applied church discipline to their local congregations. It is obvious from the works of their leaders and

⁴⁴ Mark E. Dever, "John L. Dagg," in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, ed. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 62-70.

⁴⁵J. L. Dagg, *Church Order: A Treatise* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1871), 9.

⁴⁶Ibid., 274.

⁴⁷Garret, *Baptist Church Discipline*, 18-19.

⁴⁸Wills, "The Church," 38-41.

the documents published along with their confessions that discipline was of significant value to their churches. Such value is observed in Dagg's comment, "It has been remarked, that when discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it."⁴⁹ For the Baptists, therefore, correcting the brethren by holding them accountable to the word of God was crucial if the church was to maintain a genuine testimony of their allegiance to Christ.

The Decline of Church Discipline among American Baptists

From the historical observations above, it is clear that since the beginnings of Baptist reform movements, church discipline has been a key element for genuine church life. Why then has it seemingly escaped the modern scene? Though a handful of Baptist churches still sanction disciplinary measures, the majority have ceased to take it into consideration. Scholars have observed several factors contributing to this decline of corrective church discipline in the contemporary American Baptist circle.

First, they have noted a shift in doctrine. Since the Enlightenment, the churches understanding of man has conformed to the teachings of the surrounding American culture.⁵⁰ Instead of embracing a biblical worldview, where man is created in God's image and defined by his Maker and subject to the Divine moral Law, Americans tend to embrace an "autonomous moral individualism."⁵¹ As a result, man not only defines reality on his own terms, but also lives on his own terms. He is free from God and free from any thing that might presume authority over him. Sadly, churches have fallen prey

⁴⁹Dagg, *Church Order*, 274.

⁵⁰Stephen M. Haines, "Southern Baptist Church Discipline, 1880-1939," *Baptist History and Heritage* 20, no. 2 (April 1985): 25.

⁵¹R. Albert Mohler, "Church Discipline: The Missing Mark," in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington: Nine Marks Ministries, 2001), 44.

to this mindset. Though believers acknowledge Christ as Lord, they have divorced the Messianic community in matters of faith and practice. The life of the believer is considered off limits to the other brethren. Confronting a brother for the occasion of sin is now an invasion of personal privacy. No longer do members profess to give themselves to one another in corporate responsibility,⁵² but join a club for moral support in their own individual affairs. R. Albert Mohler further observes that even the “rights talk” of the secular society has influenced many churches. He writes, “Church members are so committed to their version of “rights talk” that some congregations accept almost any behavior, belief, or lifestyle as acceptable, or at least off limits to congregational sanction.”⁵³ In other words, an individual’s rights now hold sway over his moral responsibility to the word of God and Christ’s church. The new anthropology of the autonomous self, resulting in radical individualism, is one factor weakening the Baptist’s steadfast commitment to church discipline.

The second factor in the decline of church discipline is a noticeable shift in ecclesiological focus. This too finds its roots in the church embracing the things of the secular American society. Stephen M. Haines observes, “American churches experienced a general secularizing of values and procedures from 1880 to 1920.”⁵⁴ They embraced the techniques and methods of successful corporate businesses and applied them “to shape and order the congregation.”⁵⁵ Haines notes, “As the churches applied the methods of

⁵²Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 21.

⁵³Mohler, “Church Discipline,” 47.

⁵⁴Haines, “Southern Baptist Church Discipline,” 26.

⁵⁵Ibid.

business they appropriated a new term: efficiency.”⁵⁶ Gregory A. Wills makes the same observation in his work, *Democratic Religion*. He writes, “They [churches across the nation] instituted more efficient systems of church finance and transformed themselves into centers of social life and recreational activity. Efficiency became the watchword of a new generation.”⁵⁷ No longer were the churches concerned with purity, but efficiency. The American principles of “success,” focused on numerical goals, drove ecclesiastical matters rather than doctrine and principles of Scripture. Churches no longer sought the saints’ perseverance through corrective discipline, but tolerated sin amongst the brethren for better financial gains.⁵⁸ Criteria for pastors even changed, becoming more focused on their abilities as managers⁵⁹ rather than their discernment as a shepherd to tend the flock of God, guarding it from wolves. The aim for efficiency, therefore, trumped doctrine and practice. It is this newer ecclesiology that also aided in the decline of church discipline.

Third, churches have abandoned their confessional nature. Though Baptist churches would admit the Bible to be their source for doctrine and practice, many have forsaken what they have historically confessed the Bible teaches. In other words, confessing to believe the Bible is not enough. All churches admitted to that, within many denominations, even while maintaining great theological error. Instead, Baptist’s have historically believed that churches must also confess what it is the Bible is actually teaching. Only then, by establishing specific statements of faith, did churches cultivate

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 131.

⁵⁸Ibid., 136-137.

⁵⁹Ibid., 131-132.

unity in purpose, set goals in worship,⁶⁰ and create accountability in life. Without common confession, churches opened themselves “to embrace into fellowship those whom the apostle anathematizes.”⁶¹ Many congregations fell into this trap for two reasons. One, they took their traditional hedge of protection for granted. Tom Nettles observes, “Denominationalism isolation with increased denominational efficiency produced an overconfidence in safety and an increasing carelessness about issues of doctrine.”⁶² Two, churches adopted the individualism of the postmodern American culture. On a much broader evangelical level, David Wells writes, “As the nostrums of the therapeutic age supplant confession, and as preaching is psychologized, the meaning of Christian faith becomes privatized. At a single stroke, confession is eviscerated and reflection reduced mainly to thought about one’s self.”⁶³ Apart from corporate confession, which grounds the church in doctrine and binds her members together in the pursuit of holiness, there can be no enforced discipline. No one is sure what the Bible teaches or how it might affect the way they live. For this reason also, church discipline waned.

Fourth, the different burdens it laid upon people also contributed to the decline of discipline in America. Obstacles such as hurt feelings, angry relatives, and grief, on many occasions, would cause church members to tolerate the sin of a brother. Doing so would enable them to avoid certain feuds. In his research of the Baptist South, Wills finds

⁶⁰Tom Nettles, *Ready for Reformation: Bringing Authentic Reform to Southern Baptist Churches* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Press, 2005), 13.

⁶¹Ibid., 21.

⁶²Ibid., 12.

⁶³David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 101.

several occasions where members expressed church discipline to be “distasteful,” and pastors lamented it as a “painful duty.”⁶⁴ Also, larger congregations found discipline to be very burdensome when dealing with so many members.⁶⁵ Thus, various burdens discouraged churches from maintaining their cause with discipline.

The fifth factor deals primarily with church membership. Since the modern “Seeker Sensitive” movement, church membership has become rather flippant. What used to be a process and inquiry of the person’s heart for the sake of maintaining a regenerate church membership has now become a relaxed welcome to anyone interested. In the matter of minutes it takes to sing a single hymn, one is able to join the church by walking down an aisle, filling out a card, and being presented before the assembly only to receive a unanimous applause of reception. This welcome is based on no prior knowledge of the person’s heart, his confession, or, if a believer, his disobedience that caused removal from a prior assembly. After admitting members so carelessly, a church would not genuinely be able to enforce discipline. Meaningless membership, therefore, has also contributed to such decline in discipline.

Sixth, the biblical concept of sin has been “psychologized.” Sin is no longer something inherent within mankind, Adam’s posterity, but merely something that happens to man. The heart is no longer the source of wickedness (Luke 6:43-45), but something outside the person. Mohler rightly observes this contemporary understanding when he writes, “The theological category of sin has been replaced, in many circles, with

⁶⁴Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 119.

⁶⁵Ibid., 9. Haines also comes to the same conclusion regarding larger congregations. “Size...did appear to be related to the willingness of a church to discipline. ...The church most likely to discipline members was a small, rural church whose members shared common values and had reasonable familiarity with one another’s lives” (Haines, “Southern Baptist Church Discipline,” 24).

the psychological concept of therapy....Church members may make poor choices, fail to live up to the expectations of an oppressive culture, or be inadequately self-actualized—but they no longer sin.”⁶⁶ In some circles, corrective church discipline has been replaced with psychological therapy. This too has contributed to a modern decrease of discipline.

For numerous reasons therefore, church discipline has declined in the contemporary American Baptist circle. None of the reasons, however, remove the demands of Scripture or the responsibility of Christ’s church to perform them appropriately. Baptist forefathers desired to reform to the NT pattern, and thus preserve and purify the church through corrective discipline. Contemporary Baptists can either succumb to the world and entertain goats, or reinstate discipline and shepherd the sheep.

Applying Church Discipline to Contemporary Baptist Life

Restoring the Practice of Church Discipline

The biblical and historical evidence demands a restoration of corrective church discipline. In the church, there must be an immortal bond between what members understand from the word of God and what they practice in life, which bears witness to its authority. In other words, doctrine and ecclesiology are not divorced. If the Scriptures teach the church is to be holy because her heavenly Father is holy (1 Pet 1:16), then she is bound to confirm it by the way she lives. By striving to conform themselves to the apostolic mold, Baptists have historically sought to discipline brethren whose lives contradicted the Law of Christ. Baptists used church discipline as a God-ordained instrument of ecclesiastical practice to preserve the church, sanctify the elect, and glorify

⁶⁶Mohler, “Church Discipline,” 45.

Christ. If they are to maintain their cause in upholding the word of God and reforming to the NT pattern, not settling for less, then Baptists must honestly consider restoring the practice of church discipline.

The Benefits of Practicing Church Discipline

Their recovery of this mark will make them the beneficiaries of great ecclesiological gain on several levels. First, by disciplining its members, the testimony of God's authority over his people goes forth into the world. The church will not be looked upon as another club consisting of people following their own desires. Instead, they will be seen as a redeemed body, radically changed, and wholly submitted to the supremacy of their head, Jesus Christ. When the Lord's name is proven holy in the midst of the assembly, because his people walk according to his statutes, then the nations will know that he is the Lord (Ezek 36:22-27).

Second, exercising church discipline will be used to by Christ to purify the church. Its aim is for the sanctification of those believers practicing sin. It calls them to repent from sin, warns them of its consequences, and restores them to a fellowship that serves in the fight against sin. Discipline provides the elders with opportunities to observe the hardness of individuals' hearts in not heeding the words of Scripture, and allows for correction or removal. It will cleanse the church from those who are practicing malice, yet claiming to walk with Christ. In this way, it aspires to maintain regenerate members who have separated themselves from darkness to walk together in marvelous light.

Third, practicing discipline will spring forth an environment for spiritual fervor. Gregory A. Wills observed that nineteenth century Baptist churches "maintained

high rates of discipline at the same time they experienced rapid growth.”⁶⁷ “Discipline and revival appeared to go together,” he writes.⁶⁸ Certainly, a people pursuing purity is consequential of a love for God and his word. Embracing church discipline will stir the people to be grounded in doctrine and prepared to obey. It beckons sinners to repent, and calls a congregation to forgive. It charges the saints to obey, and tells the church to hold them accountable to it. “Purity produces spiritual vigor.”⁶⁹

Clearly, these three effects of practicing church discipline are beneficial for the church. Discipline is not meant to be destructive, but helpful for the church’s mission. Christ knows what is best for his church, and so he has left her instructions to follow. In so doing, sanctified saints will gladly pursue purity to testify of God’s authority.

Practical Advice for Restoring Church Discipline

Baptists should not fear, nor should they neglect executing a practice demonstrated, taught, and commanded in the Scriptures. Though its reinstatement is often worrisome for leadership and members, there are several ways that will aid the assembly in welcoming church discipline once again.

First, there must be a recovery of meaningful membership.⁷⁰ Membership is not the presence of a name on a roll for numerical gain, personal assurance, or bragging rights. If people can remain on a church roll, regardless of their attendance at church functions, active service in ministry, and continual obedience to the word of Christ, then

⁶⁷Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 36.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid., 35.

⁷⁰Mark E. Dever, “Shaping Holy Disciples: Mark Dever says church discipline is not about punishment or self-help,” Interview by Mark Galli, in *Christianity Today*, 49 (August 2005), 33.

members will not be concerned with the pursuit of a purified, unified body, and thus discipline will be disregarded. Until elders and members realize the significance of church membership, they will not comprehend the need for disciplinary measures to be taken against those who bear the fruit of a bad tree.

Meaningful membership was of utmost concern for Baptists J. L. Dagg and Benjamin Keach. Both of these men taught that in order for one to join the church, he or she must give clear evidence of conversion through testimony and continual demonstration of a changed life. Only then, would the church vote to receive them into fellowship through believer's baptism.⁷¹ Those adhering to the Philadelphia tradition also wrote in the preface to *A Treatise of Church Discipline* (1798), "Let there be pretty clear evidence of a work of grace. Slackness, or inattention here, has been the bane of the church, in all ages."⁷² Churches were to be confident that those they received into fellowship were genuinely saved. Candidates were also required to covenant with the congregation upon membership.⁷³ Wills provides an example of this kind of covenant from a Baptist church in Georgia. It reads,

We do voluntarily and jointly separate ourselves from the world, and give ourselves unto the Lord, holding ourselves henceforth his, and no longer our own. We do also voluntarily and mutually give ourselves one to another; and receive one another in the Lord, meaning hereby to become one body, jointly to exist and act by the bonds and rules of the gospel, each esteeming himself henceforth a member of a

⁷¹Dagg, *Church Order*, 268-9; Keach, *Glory of a True Church*, 64-5.

⁷²In the preface to *A Treatise of Church Discipline, and a Directory* (1798), quoted in Robert T. Tandy, "The Philadelphia Tradition," in *Baptist Concepts of the Church: A Survey of the Historical and Theological Issues which Have Produced Changes in Church Order*, ed. Winthrop Still Hudson (Chicago: Judson Press, 1959), 35.

⁷³Keach, *Glory of a True Church*, 65.

spiritual body, accountable to it, subject to its control, and no otherwise separable therefrom than by consent first had or unreasonably refused.⁷⁴

Joining the church was separating from the world, being wholly given to Christ, and covenanting with others given to the same gospel cause. In short, becoming a member meant abiding by the apostolic pattern of the church. Membership included not only their commitment to Christ as individuals, and therefore his kingdom, but to one another as a body, and therefore the church's mission.⁷⁵ Naturally, however, this also meant the removal of those who bore the fruits of the unregenerate and who did not participate with the local body. Manifested in the local body, meaningful membership is cultivated by discerning interviews before baptisms, well-informed new-member's classes, active connection with the local assembly, cheerful giving towards ministry causes, faithful devotion to serving one another, and real removal of unrepentant members from the role.

Second, a recovery of corporate responsibility is needed; an accountability that members of the body have to one another in doctrine and practice. The church must flee the radical individualism of this age. Paul said that the church "is being fitted and held together by every ligament with which it is equipped, according to the proper working of each individual part." This "causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love" (Eph 4:16, author's translation). The church grows spiritually by the power and authority of Christ,⁷⁶ *through* the various relationships the members of the body have

⁷⁴Church Book, Phillips Mill Baptist Church, (10 June 1785), in Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 21.

⁷⁵Biblical warrant for this kind of commitment is found in Paul's letters when he rejoices in the evidence of the gospel's work to bring faith in Christ and love for the brethren (Col 1:3-4; 2 Thess 1:3; 1 Tim 1:5; Phlm 1:5).

⁷⁶The beginning of the clause in v. 16 is ἐξ οὗ ("from whom"), and is referring back to the Head, Christ, as the source of its growth.

with one another. Members must be involved in each other's spiritual lives, or the body will fail to grow as Christ wants it to grow. Once the church members see themselves as united together for the cause of Christ, then they will be more in tune with stirring one another to love and good deeds (Heb 10:24). Mark E. Dever rightly concludes that "the church needs to be a web of meaningful spiritual relationships in which people are engaging each other in casual conversation, spiritual conversation, mutually encouraging and sanctifying discipling relationships, mutual accountability, and small groups."⁷⁷ Individualism will drive the church away from discipline. Meaningful relationships with others to whom people are accountable will foster an environment for discipline. Corporate responsibility can be encouraged through humble pastoral confession, purposeful small group Bible studies, deliberate accountability groups, and public prayer requests for saints struggling with particular sins.

Third, genuine discipleship must be recovered. This stems from a commitment to corporate responsibility, because in it is the duty to ensure that new Christians receive adequate instruction about the church and her obedience to the word of God. In his chapter on discipline, Dagg encourages his readers towards discipleship saying, "Let the heads which have grown gray in the service of the Lord, bow with pleasure to impart instruction to the opening minds of the rising generation, and sow in this promising soil the seed which will produce a rich harvest, when the gray-haired instructor shall have gone to his eternal reward."⁷⁸ Members must ground young disciples in pure doctrine, and instruct them in applying it to their lives. The aim of this discipleship is to renew the

⁷⁷Mark E. Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 69.

⁷⁸Dagg, *Church Order*, 272.

mind with sound doctrine so that the heart rejoices to obey. They are to be taught to flee immorality, to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, and to hunger for righteousness. Teaching church discipline should also be introduced during this time, and even exercised periodically to demonstrate its restorative nature and the brethren's utter seriousness to help rid each other of sin. In so doing, church discipline will be woven into the fabric of the church and gradually restored to its appropriate place.

By making membership meaningful, reestablishing corporate responsibility, and nurturing new believers through discipleship, Baptists will begin to move away from the things that once led to the decline in discipline. Strong beliefs regarding membership will help cleanse the church of careless admission into the body, and will aid in reestablishing a confessing body of believers who are first united to Christ and then to one another. Upholding corporate responsibility will relieve members of individualism, and teach them the importance of accountability and discipline as means to their sanctification. By implementing biblical discipleship, churches will be pointed to Christ instead of numerical goals, to orthodoxy instead of heterodoxy, and to repentance instead of making excuses. Once these things take place, members will be moved to exercise discipline for the sake of Christ and the preservation of the church. It will no longer be seen as a sour practice, but a needed one that helps the community of faith to bear the fruits of her salvation and testify to the authority of her Lord.

Conclusion

The Scriptures have given clear testimony to the practice of corrective church discipline for the preservation of purity and the promotion of spiritual well-being among the saints. Historically, Baptists have been committed to this practice out of their

steadfast devotion to the supremacy of Christ's word. However, in yielding to the contemporary American social agenda, discipline has waned. By applying certain principles in ecclesiological practices, this ordained tool of sanctification could be restored.

In conclusion, Baptists must maintain their historical commitment in reforming to the NT pattern of the church and submitting to the authority of the apostolic word, both in faith and practice. Scripture alone should shape their ecclesiology. This means a deliberate restoration of church discipline is needed. It is not merely to be mentioned in confessions and covenants, but practiced in the local assembly. By restoring discipline, members of the body will be motivated to maintain their cause in pure devotion to Christ and the church will be greatly helped in her sanctification.

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