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**Commending Religion to All around Us: Baptist Church Discipline, 1780-1850**

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## Introduction

In 1818, a letter signed “B.” was sent to *The American Baptist Magazine and Missionary Intelligencer*. The letter, titled “Things to be set in order in the churches,” stated that the Baptists’ “moral and social habits, including [their] general intercourse with the world, must be such, as to commend religion to all around us.”<sup>1</sup> While all religions fashion themselves pure and saintly, B., and his Baptist contemporaries, truly believed that their discipline and social habits, not just their internal piety, made them the world’s saviors. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, American Baptist congregations were flourishing.<sup>2</sup> In 1740, there were still only sixty Baptist congregations, but their numbers steadily grew into a strong and sustainable denomination. Baptist leaders coupled revolutionary democratization with strict rules and unfaltering discipline to create a system of beliefs that attracted converts. Discipline, the system of rules and punishments used by a church, prescribed the proper behavior for a church member and set up processes by which members were verbally reprimanded, suspended, and expelled from the church. Discipline can be found in all Christian denominations, but the Baptist’s democratic organization gave discipline a distinctive role in their churches: not only was it used to dictate proper roles to believers, discipline attracted and controlled members through its strictness, safeguarded democracy, kept members in the church, and maintained authority in the hands of Baptist leaders, a problem that other denominations, such as the Methodists, failed to address during this period.

By focusing on the scriptural basis for all laws, congregants had less chance to oppose

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<sup>1</sup> B., “Things to Be Set in Order in the Churches,” *The American Baptist Magazine and Missionary Intelligencer* (1817-1824), (1 November 1818), 443 [article online]; available from <http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/pqdweb?index=1&did=76734179&SrchMode=1&sid=5&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1190839233&clientId=17675>; Internet; (accessed 18 September 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Today the Baptist church is the largest Protestant denomination in America. The growth of congregations during the late eighteen and early nineteenth centuries began the Baptist church’s entrance into mainstream

discipline. All Christian churches believe that their laws are based in scripture, but the Baptists made a particular point of the argument, “true churches had no right to make new laws.” They considered themselves primitive churches, organized only according to the dictates of Christ, and they maintained that strict scriptural adherence was a major component in a pure church. This thinking was keeping in line with all Protestant impulses, which sought to purify the church in some way or another, but the Baptists were one of the most radical sects when it came to the idea of purity and primitiveness.<sup>3</sup>

Church discipline was vital to the growth of Baptists churches because it set rigid but reasonable parameters for membership and salvation. In newspaper and magazine articles, as well as church documents, it is clear that both the threat and security of discipline were always in the front of a Baptist’s mind. While the Baptists were not the only growing church during this time, their use of discipline set them apart by its conservatism. The Baptists tried to limit even amusements, such as dancing, that were not explicitly stated in the Bible because of their conservative view of proper behavior. Debates over whether order or liberty should reign supreme in the Baptist faith were waged in congregations across the nation, and church discipline helped bridge the gap between both notions. The church used institutions such as brethren run committees to investigate charges of impropriety. Each member was placed within a hierarchy of acceptable involvement ranging from slave’s limited role in disciplining their own race through to the ministers’ ultimate decision on how to deal with overarching disciplinary practices and individual cases. This provided every Baptist adherent with an active role in disciplinary actions.

The American Revolution had a profound impact on the ability of the Baptist church elders to attract new members by changing the religious landscape. Additionally, while church discipline

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Protestant status and paved the way for later success.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-*

continued to be a major force in Baptist churches until after the Civil War, the early years of the Second Great Awakening saw the last real support for conservative, community-enacted discipline. As the century continued, discipline became much more of an internal struggle, and the discipline committees and public listings of sinners and excommunications became a thing of the past. The time just before and during the Second Great Awakening was the pinnacle of Baptist church discipline because of elevated religious zeal, democratic zeal, and the mobile American population. The same religious zeal that caused rigid discipline requirements also pushed church populations to new heights, but as towns grew, populations stabilized, and the Second Great Awakening waned, discipline became internally monitored. Congregations no longer got together in mass to assail errant members. Families and individuals instead took up that burden.

The United States was in a position of change during the 1780s and the Baptists' strict discipline requirements and disdain for worldly amusements was a potential avenue for people searching for Christianity in the new republic. Some people believed that for the new republic to succeed, civic duty and pious, modest behavior must flourish. In this capacity, Baptist church discipline appealed to people who thought the world too secular. The Church attracted and controlled converts who found that other Protestant denominations were too lax. Baptists also used church discipline as a safeguard against religious revolutionaries. It acted not only as a form of individual order to ensure purity and obedience in their brethren, but as a way to maintain egalitarian church structure without too much rebellion. In this capacity, Gregory A. Wills has written in depth about the Baptist churches in this period in his book *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*.<sup>4</sup> Finally, each

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1900, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 28-29.

<sup>4</sup> He argued that church discipline was the main principle that kept Baptists from breaking off into new denominations, although his argument looked at discipline even as it became a private matter and did not look at the way that discipline actually shaped the experiences of individual members, particularly ignoring

Baptist church in America maintained the same doctrine while exercising local autonomy. There were county, state, and national organizations that set standards, but there was no bishop or principle that controlled every church. Additionally, within each congregation, the Baptist faith believed that all members could speak directly to God by opening their hearts to his word. Because of the church's democratic structure, found in both their government and their worship, church elders needed to find a way to maintain control over members who sought to reinterpret church doctrine or organization, while still keeping the core tenets of egalitarian worship. Church discipline was designed to control the congregation in a fair, egalitarian, and gentle manner. They linked discipline to scripture and sainthood, making it a necessary element of Christian worship and brotherhood, and they used the notion of brotherhood to employ all members in the process of accusation, assistance, and reform. Discipline became synonymous with brotherly love because it kept the church pure and was facilitated in a way that made church members feel that they had an active role in protecting the souls of their brethren.<sup>5</sup> People who did not believe this were unsuccessful in the church because all members had to support disciplinary measures and show adequate penitence when charged with committing a sin. By exercising conservatism, the members who endured retained strict behavioral standards. Their claim in the religious landscape was stricter church discipline in the case of backsliding, and their full, self-professing, adult membership meant that expectations for the whole church were higher when it came to self-control.<sup>6</sup> Baptist church discipline maintained order within the churches by balancing individual freedom and religious interpretation with rigid standards of how to act and conduct

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how it attracted new members. Additionally, because he took his study through to 1900, he looked at the height as well as the decline of discipline, focusing on each shift or decline in discipline through the years.

<sup>5</sup> These ideals discussed in depth in "Church Discipline." *The Religious Intelligencer . . . Containing the Principal Transactions of the Various Bible and Missionary Societies, with Particular Accounts of Revivals of Religion (1816-1837)*, 7 November 1818. <http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/pqdweb?index=0&did=822467902&SrchMode=1&sid=6&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&Vname=HNP&TS=1190839426&clientId=17675> (accessed 18 September 2007).

church business.

### Historical Context

During and after the American Revolution, the religious organizations of the United States underwent many changes relating to disestablishment, multiple establishment laws, and competitive denominations. Because the United States was no longer a part of Britain, the Anglican Church reformed into the Episcopal Church, and it suffered greatly after its loss of establishment. Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, as well as other denominations in smaller degrees, moved in to attract many of the former Anglican adherents. They were all successful because of the unmotivated clergy that establishment had raised in the Anglican church. Anglicans never had to actively attract members before, and many Anglican clergymen were inattentive to the growing frontier areas. They preferred to stay in the settled coastal regions because of its physical comfort and their own sloth, so even if people would have preferred or at least been indifferent to staying with the Anglican church, when they moved to unsettled regions of the country, that was not always possible.<sup>7</sup> Prior to the American Revolution, the Anglican church could count on its role in most of the southern and middle Atlantic colonies as the established religion, and even all of the northern colonies had at least some representation of Anglican worship, so laziness among the clergy was not a significant problem. Unfortunately for Anglicans, though, many clergymen fled back to England during or after the Revolution, so the few that stayed behind needed to work even harder to maintain their former congregations.<sup>8</sup>

While not all states disestablished their churches immediately after the Revolution or even after the Constitution was ratified, many states created multiple establishment laws to replace the

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<sup>6</sup> Backsliding was the term used for a person's reversion back to sinful, worldly ways.

<sup>7</sup> Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*, (Chapel Hill: University of North

previous establishments of one church.<sup>9</sup> The new Episcopal Church was affected by these efforts because they had always benefited from the taxes and laws that establishment in some states afforded them. While not every state had laws in place that levied taxes or upheld Anglican doctrine, enough measures had been in place to affect the success of the church. Establishment had funded their institution and empowered their actions. Congregational churches also suffered during this time period, although they maintained their established status in some states well into the nineteenth century, and Congregationalists also defected to the newer denominations.<sup>10</sup> The ideals and realities of the Revolution had caused a major shift in the religious landscape of America.

The Second Great Awakening, a loose series of revivals orchestrated primarily by the three major Evangelical sects, the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, was successful in bringing new converts into Protestantism by their use of revivals and their willingness to enter the frontier. Debates are still waged over how cohesive and how long the movement was, but the early nineteenth century certainly saw increased religious enthusiasm.<sup>11</sup> This enthusiasm, while still present throughout the antebellum period, seemed to wane as revivals became routine. The main observable trait of the Second Great Awakening was the use of revivals and camp meetings to bring evangelical Christianity to the masses in the same manner that the First Great Awakening of the 1740s had. People got caught up in the emotion of revivals, and most importantly, they often provided religion in areas of the nation that were not often reached by multiple, or any, religious services. Ministers also used the same advertising tactics that the ministers in the First Great

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Carolina Press, 1997), 22.

<sup>9</sup> Maryland's 1776 constitution, Georgia's 1777 constitution, and South Carolina's 1778 constitution authorized support or funding for Protestant denominations. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 259.

<sup>10</sup> Massachusetts, in 1833, was the last state to disestablish religion.

<sup>11</sup> Historiography of the Second Great Awakening is discussed in Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 220-226.



Awakening had. In the 1740s, evangelical ministers glorified their upcoming sermons by reporting record crowds at past appearances, inflating attendance figures, and assessing the effect of past sermons on crowds' senses, souls, and interest in donating money. Publicity was used to gain crowds for itinerant ministers often months in advance.<sup>12</sup> While this method was better understood during the Second Great Awakening, it was no less effective. Revivalist preachers often became a major source of entertainment as well as salvation in the early nineteenth century.

The Baptist church existed in America in different forms since the earliest settlement of New England. Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, organized the first Baptist congregation in 1638 with eleven other settlers. His form of Baptist worship centered solely on the ideas that only able-minded adults should be baptized and that a church should be so pure that it modeled exactly the invisible church, the church of God's elect.<sup>13</sup> By 1790, there were almost one thousand Baptist congregations in the United States, and while different strains of belief existed, the main components of the church stood as baptism only for confessing adult believers, and most peculiarly in a time when most people did not swim, baptism by submersion.<sup>14</sup> Baptism by submersion is the process of submerging a person fully in water to perform baptism, and it has often acted as one of the most universally intriguing, feared, or misunderstood practices in the Baptist faith.<sup>15</sup> Baptists believed that the Bible called for complete submersion to fully wash one's sins away. They also believed that only adults could fully understand whether they were saved or not, so adult Baptism was the only way to maintain that their church only admitted pure believers. Adult baptism by submersion implied that every member must be a pure believer, which in turn

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<sup>12</sup> Frank Lambert, *The Founding Father and the Place of Religion in America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 139.

<sup>13</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, *Roger Williams*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 52.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 20.

meant that they were following the true line of the apostles as set up in the Bible. The two other aspects that went along with following the original apostolic church were strict Biblical discipline and local autonomy for each church, and both characteristics were applied to the Baptist church.<sup>16</sup> Besides adult baptism by submersion and the underlying principle that only adults could know whether they were saved and receive the sacraments and spiritual safety net that baptism provides, the Baptist faith varied little from other evangelical strains of Christianity. It was marked by a shunning of worldly activities, but that was prevalent in most evangelical churches. Even where they entered the mainstream in regards to what they believed, though, they still took an extremist approach. They forbade dancing, and members were expected to experience little to no backsliding. Baptist churches were models of conservatism, and the need for rigid discipline requirements grew from there.

### **Part One: Attracting & Controlling Members**

Discipline was “a subject of high importance, and cannot be neglected without endangering the peace and prosperity of our Redeemer’s kingdom,” Crispus reminded readers of *The Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine* in December 1812, and he was certain that “to this sentiment [the readers would] all readily subscribe.”<sup>17</sup> Chances were good, as long as the readers actually were Baptist, they would indeed readily subscribe to the sentiment. Discipline was expected in Baptist fellowship during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and that discipline was not just the minister’s rule over his brethren. There was a deeply ingrained sense that the Lord, the church leaders, and every member of the brethren acted together to maintain Christian law and morality. Baptists believed that the “Lord has made it the duty of

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<sup>16</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 29.

<sup>17</sup> Crispus, “Thoughts on Church Discipline,” *The Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, (December 1812), 244 [article online]; available from <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=828388692&Fmt=6&clientId=>

Christians, to watch over one another in love, to warn, rebuke, and admonish one another.”<sup>18</sup>

Discipline played a much larger role in church culture than just as a means of enforcing rules: it became a way to attract and control members of the church.

Since many people were attracted to America because they wished to escape religious persecution in their homeland, it was very early on that competing strains of Christianity shared the same areas and created a country of religious competition. While Christian competition was increasing throughout the western world at this time period, America was still the apex of religious pluralism because of the many different immigrant groups and children of former immigrant religious dissenters. In such an environment, each church had to find a distinctive way to attract converts. Most evangelicals used advertisements for revivals and preachers in newspapers and public spaces as well as emotionally charged sermons to convert people. Along with that, they stressed that their churches were pure. A pure church is one that is filled with only God’s elect. A church that considers itself pure is considered by its adherents completely free from hypocrites and full of those who have the faith to follow the word of God, and Baptists asserted that they were building such a church by only allowing in adult converts who exhibited behavior harmonious with the bible.

Baptists believed that they had happier members because of their status as a pure church. If all members joined as adults, they were voluntarily in a church whose key tenets they felt attracted to, so there were fewer doctrinal disagreements, and that made members happier. As Wills asserts, “the fruit of purity was unity of the church;” purity blossomed into unity.<sup>19</sup> Baptists believed that a church where no one disagreed over the interpretation of God’s word was more pleasant. Of

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17675&RQT=309&VName=HNP; Internet; (accessed 9 September 2007).  
<sup>18</sup> Woodstock Baptist Association, “Discipline of the Church,” *Christian Watchman*, (11 November 1825), 194 [article online]; available from <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=840049032&Fmt=6&clientId=17675&RQT=309&VName=HNP>; Internet; (accessed 18 September 2007).

course, there could never be any organization where everyone agrees whole heartedly on every point, but the Baptist's assertion that they possessed that unusual quality was enough to attract some.

Even if all Baptists were not in complete agreement over doctrine, they usually either believed in common tenets of discipline or they left voluntarily or through excommunication. Excommunication in itself acted as a compelling reason to live up to discipline's expectations. More concretely, even if biblical interpretation was still debated, discipline remained relatively uniform throughout the denomination. Most churches published documents called summaries of church discipline, or something similar, and looking at these show the uniformity between all congregations. The Charleston Association reprinted "A Summary of Church Discipline, Shewing the Qualifications and Duties, of the Officers and Members, of a Gospel-Church." in 1783 and 1794 with the exact same qualifications for "receiving persons to church membership."<sup>20</sup> In 1798, Samuel Jones, on behalf of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, claimed in the chapter titled "the admission of members" that "the prerequisites for baptism and admission into the church are godly experience, soundness in the faith, and a regular life." These same notions filled the Charleston Association's summaries.<sup>21</sup> One thing that religious pluralism afforded was the opportunity for dissenters to choose another church. Furthermore, Baptists did not have sympathy for those who

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<sup>19</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 32.

<sup>20</sup> Charleston Baptist Association (S.C.). "A Summary of Church Discipline, Shewing the Qualifications and Duties, of the Officers and Members, of a Gospel-Church." Wilmington, Del.: James Adams, 1783, [http://iw.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/Evans?p\\_action=doc&p\\_theme=eaidoc&p\\_topdoc=1&p\\_docnum=1&p\\_sort=YMD\\_date:D&p\\_product=EVAN&p\\_docid=0F2FD31224020098&p\\_text\\_direct0=document\\_id=\(%200F2FD31224020098%20\)&p\\_nbid=M5BO4BVBMTTE5MDczNzIzMS41MDc0NTM6MT0xMT0xMzEuMjE2LjEuMQ](http://iw.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/Evans?p_action=doc&p_theme=eaidoc&p_topdoc=1&p_docnum=1&p_sort=YMD_date:D&p_product=EVAN&p_docid=0F2FD31224020098&p_text_direct0=document_id=(%200F2FD31224020098%20)&p_nbid=M5BO4BVBMTTE5MDczNzIzMS41MDc0NTM6MT0xMT0xMzEuMjE2LjEuMQ) (accessed 18 September 2007).

Charleston Baptist Association (S.C.). "A Summary of Church Discipline [sic] Shewing the Qualifications and Duties of the Officers and Members of a Gospel-Church." Richmond: John Dixon, 1794, <http://docs.newsbank.com/s/Evans/eaidoc/EVAN/0F3018C3845AC2E8/0BB295CEAF424306BCADA379D413C8A3> (accessed 18 September 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Jones. "A treatise of Church Discipline and a Directory. Done by Appointment of the Philadelphia Baptist Association" Philadelphia: S.C. Ustick, 1798, <http://docs.newsbank.com/s/Evans/eaidoc/EVAN/>

disagreed with their standards of discipline. The members who stayed were likeminded individuals, and that meant stronger harmony and community ties. Additionally, there was no grace period for sinning. The minute someone was baptized, and often long before, they were expected to follow the rules that every member followed. Since the Baptists allowed nonmembers to sit in on their services, the church often knew the behavior of a potential member even before baptism. Every Baptist church followed the same rules, and more importantly, every individual.

In contrast, the Methodist church at this time found it hard to enforce uniform standards. One major problem was their use of traveling preachers called itinerants. Young Methodist itinerants had a problem controlling their churches because when they would move on to a new congregation along their preaching circuit, they would often find that their expectations were quite different than the congregation's former minister. Particularly in the case of slavery and sexual morality, itinerant preachers often had different ideas on what standards should be enforced. This problem would have existed even with fixed congregations because the Methodists were unsuccessful at setting uniform parameters, but it was magnified by the preachers' itinerancy.<sup>22</sup>

The fact that Baptists were more successful in maintaining established disciplinary practices also made them appealing to mobile families. Westward expansion often meant entering a community where ones' church was either not present or doctrinally different from the church he left. Especially since Baptists tended to attract the common sorts of people, they often had congregants who moved to less settled areas. The Baptists remedied this by not only forming frontier churches whether there was enough population to sustain them, but also fostering interchurch relations to aid people in their settlement into a new church. States and counties had Baptist organizations, and each organization was usually aware of what was happening in other

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0F30193BAD29DBF0/0BB295CEAF424306BCADA379D413C8A3 (accessed 18 September 2007).  
<sup>22</sup> Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*, (Chapel Hill: University of North

congregations through the use of circular letters and Baptist newspapers. Note the extract from a Circular Letter of the Appomattox Baptist Association that found its way into the Bostonian *Christian Watchman* in 1824. The Appomattox Association stressed the “absolute necessity, of prompt, decisive, close, Apostolick discipline in the church,” and Bostonian Baptists found it imperative to repeat this call for discipline.<sup>23</sup> Baptists knew what other Baptists were doing, and congregations often formed their covenants based on ideas put forth by other American and even English congregations. This uniformity strengthened the national Baptist cause, and not only did it attract and control members, it later retained them, also.

Once a member was baptized into the church, discipline became, not surprisingly, the main way to control them. Discipline in its simplest form was meant to prescribe appropriate behavior and find ways to reward and punish accordingly. Discipline procedures acted in two ways; they were democratic in nature, which will be discussed further in Part II, but their primary function was the traditional role of prescribing proper behavior for a congregation. In this capacity, discipline directly affected the lives of all individual Baptists regardless of gender, color, or position of servitude.

Women were often the majority of Baptist congregations through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is partially explained by the feminine nature of early evangelicalism. In *Disorderly Women*, Susan Juster argues that all evangelical converts, including men, called themselves “brides of Christ” during the first Great Awakening and until the Revolution. This action symbolizes the evangelical femininity. The elevation of heart over head also feminized evangelicalism. Women could find themselves in the profession of preacher or church teacher

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Carolina Press, 1997), 93-94.

<sup>23</sup> Appomattox Baptist Association, “Church Discipline,” *Christian Watchman*, (16 October 1824), [article online]; available from <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=839819442&Fmt=6&clientId=17675&RQT=309&VName=HNP>; Internet; (accessed 18 September 2007).

because of the respect for the feminine nature of revival and Christian love, which was prevalent in all evangelical churches. By the 1780s, though, Baptist congregations were less likely to pride themselves on their feminine status. Seeking to leave the peripheral ends of Christianity and become recognized as an organized denomination, Baptists began to marginalize female authority in the church.<sup>24</sup>

Marginalizing feminine authority certainly did not end female prevalence in the churches themselves, though. As late as 1829, it was asserted that because women “constitute a majority in our churches, we presume it would not be safe to attempt any restrictions upon their liberty.”<sup>25</sup> Church discipline made it possible to maintain female inequality in church organization without alienating them with strict restrictions on their presence in the church. Women were kept in their place by the rules prescribed for them in the Bible, and Baptists felt assured that they need not place very many additional restrictions. Baptists believed that women were equal to men in the eyes of God, but they needed to maintain their submissive role while on Earth.

Discipline committees were formed to facilitate and control congregations on a regular basis. These were formed by every Baptist congregation to judge and decide the sins of individuals. These meetings would be held on special days, usually Saturdays, and would only be attended by members, instead of the congregation as a whole. Discipline hearings were informal, unlike a trial, but they still maintained an air of justice and formality.<sup>26</sup> Hearings provided a forum to judge men and women, white and black, slave and free. It was the business of the full congregation to decide the nature and severity of a sin. There were witnesses and confessions, and

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics & Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 4-8.

<sup>25</sup> "On Female Influence," *Columbian Star and Christian Index*, (8 August 1829), 92 [article online]; available from <http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/pqdweb?index=3&did=818796572&SrchMode=1&sid=1&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1190838844&clientId=17675>; Internet; (accessed 18 September 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-*

everyone took part. Everyone, though, did not include those who were not recognized as the saved. As one northern Georgia church specified, “no Evidence Shall be Received in this Church from the world on Tryal of aney Member,” or in other words, only church members, not those who came to the church but resisted baptism, had a say.<sup>27</sup>

Discipline put everyone in his or her respective place. For women, this usually meant controlling their sexual behavior and limiting brazen speech. When examining the various offenses in churches from 1771-1830, it is clear that those sins caused great worry to church elders when acted out by women. For the sin of disorderly character (which could include a myriad of offenses regarding behavior in public, particularly inappropriate behavior towards authority), 29 offenders were men; 119 were women. For sexual misconduct, 15 were men; 116 were women. Lying and slander was also more common in women, 59 offenses to males’ 17.<sup>28</sup> A noticeable trend is that the sins of women were closely correlated to those offenses seen as more inappropriate for women in the larger American society. For instance, disorderly character was expected from men born and raised in the spirit of the revolution, while it was improper for a woman to present herself in a disorderly fashion in public. Sexual misconduct was also expected from men, who were commonly thought to be less capable of controlling the desires of the flesh, but women were held above such coarse desires. Most men believed that women were “usually the most active, charitable, pious, and prayerful members of the church,” and acting out sexual misconduct or being disorderly could be construed as a direct assault on the church itself.<sup>29</sup> Lying and slander, more colloquially named gossip, was in a category all its own. Those two sins were believed to be

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1900, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23.

<sup>27</sup> Church Book, Poplar Springs Baptist Church, 6 July 1839.

<sup>28</sup> Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics & Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 151.

<sup>29</sup> "On Female Influence," *Columbian Star and Christian Index*, (8 August 1829), 92 [article online]; available from <http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/pqdweb?index=3&did=818796572&SrchMode=1&sid=1&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1190838844&clientId=17675;>



particularly feminine traits, and women needed to be punished for their natural bent towards them. Women may have in fact been more likely to use slander as a form of offense because they were “forced to take on a veiled, underhanded aspect” in order to have their opinions heard.<sup>30</sup> When churches such as the First Baptist Church of Providence excluded women such as Elizabeth Cross in 1816 for “the crime of using profane language . . . And also [for] her general character as a quarrelsome Woman,” it was clear that the problem was less her speech, and more her quarrelsome, unfeminine, nature.<sup>31</sup>

African Americans, both slave and free, were most likely punished for sins against their master. While free blacks were able to gain more power in evangelical churches than anywhere else, they still were placed on the same footing as slaves in most cases. They were both expected to be submissive. The Baptists recognized that piety and Christian understanding could be found in many blacks, in the case of men, often seemingly more than in whites, but they were treated like children in the church. Church elders thought that “many are too ignorant in the first principles of religious truth to be much profited by it,” so they made sermons directed towards African Americans “plain by copious use of parables, miracles, historical events, and biographical sketches” just as one would do with a sermon directed at children.<sup>32</sup> Discipline for them not only dealt with worldly sins, they were also punished for insolence in the face of their masters. The most peculiar trait of African American discipline was that they were less likely to face charges of

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Internet; (accessed 18 September 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics & Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 161.

<sup>31</sup> Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics & Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 161; quoted from Record Book, First Baptist Church of Providence, 31 August 1816, Rhode Island Historical Society.

<sup>32</sup> “ART. V.--Proceedings of the meeting in Charleston, S. C., May 13-15, 1845, on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes, together with the Report of the Commit.” *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review (1837-1871)*. October 1845. <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=343312321&Fmt=6&clientId=17675&RQT=309&VName=HNP> (accessed 05 December 2007).

misconduct, but they were more likely to be expelled when they were convicted.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, when they were not expelled, they were more likely to receive restoration if suspended or otherwise punished. This is because they were often outnumbered on, if not absent from, discipline committees, and whites were generally unsympathetic towards their sins. Even in churches where African Americans were encouraged to take part in discipline committees, since they took place on Saturdays, most of the slaves were working, so African American opinion was muted in discipline hearings. Their higher likelihood of receiving restoration was related to the way that many churches treated them like children, so it was considered acceptable for them to experience a little backsliding. They were not believed to possess the moral fortitude necessary to behave properly all the time.<sup>34</sup>

Discipline for white men in Baptist congregations differed from that of white women and African Americans because it took into account perceived manly qualities. Still, most churches were not particularly lenient when it came to manly indiscretions. Discipline, particularly in the South, was used to break engrained traditions like gambling, drinking, and dueling. Men were most commonly charged with contempt of church and violations of public order. They also constituted much higher numbers than women in profane language and unguarded speech, breaches of neighborly relations, violations of business ethics, and contempt of family/household.<sup>35</sup> Men constituted the highest amounts of misconduct and eventual discipline throughout the nation. Still, they were less likely to receive excommunication or suspension as their punishment because few men were willing to go through the submissive and arduous process

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<sup>33</sup> Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 69.

<sup>34</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 65.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics & Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 151.

of restoration.<sup>36</sup> Even in the North, where men were more likely to submit to the submission that repentance and restoration involved, they suffered fewer excommunications. The appeal of having men in the church was too much to risk running them off.

Discipline when used to attract and control members was a subtle process of stripping individual liberty from the Baptist congregants, but the people who were attracted to the Baptist church seemed unfazed by strict rules. Christian churches were expected to keep their members in line, and in that capacity, Baptist church discipline acted no differently than the discipline and prescribed rules of other churches, but in its conservatism, it placed itself on secure footing. By balancing strict Biblical interpretations with the reality of American society the church succeeded at preserving a membership that believed in the Baptist interpretation of doctrine without feeling spiritually or personally oppressed. As an anonymous Baptist suggested in 1818, “if we love the soul of our brother, we shall say, ‘He is fallen to-day, and I will reprove him for his good: I may fall to-morrow, and then let him deal the same with me.’”<sup>37</sup>

### **Part Two: Relationship between Discipline and Democracy**

Discipline conferences and committees acted as the main form of democratic participation in the Baptist church. Members were employed on year round discipline committees that would investigate charges against church members, prepare reports, and present their findings before the rest of the church members, all of whom would then discuss or even vote on the matter at hand.<sup>38</sup> This allowed ordinary people to have a say in what constituted sin and how sins should be dealt

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<sup>36</sup> Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 215.

<sup>37</sup> "Church Discipline." *The Religious Intelligencer . . . Containing the Principal Transactions of the Various Bible and Missionary Societies, with Particular Accounts of Revivals of Religion (1816-1837)*, (7 November 1818), 361 [article online]; available from <http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/pqdweb?index=0&did=822467902&SrchMode=1&sid=6&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1190839426&clientId=17675>; Internet; (accessed 18 September 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 22.

with. They also were an added form of accountability for ones' actions. To be placed on a committee, a person must be without sin themselves. This was yet another earthly incentive to follow scriptural discipline. Additional committees would be formed to discuss individual cases. In those committees, they tried to use a fair representation of women and blacks depending on the gender and race of the defendant.<sup>39</sup>

The same discipline that controlled its members gave them greater freedom, made the churches more egalitarian, and was able to squash rebellion in a way that led to greater democracy. In this capacity, discipline made democracy possible because the Baptists enacted it in a way that gave all members a voice. Democracy, a political idea usually not associated with Christian church organization, really is an appropriate way to characterize Baptist churches. Moreover, their specific treatment of autonomy, individual church operations, and conformity made them more specifically a federalist styled church. With the actual institutions of Baptist worship, a form of federalism was used to organize power structures and church government which gave individual churches independent power while still maintaining a national creed. Additionally, an egalitarian sense pervaded the churches in regards to their treatment of women and African Americans.

Each specific church could choose how to govern itself. For instance, church members voted for things such as the introduction of a new pastor or member, when to hold discipline meetings, and how to vote on discipline matters. Voting rights were decided among the founding members of an individual congregation, and they often went up for reevaluation. Individual churches chose whether to allow all members to vote or whether to exclude women, free African Americans, slaves, or any combination of the three. All of these decisions were made within the individual congregations, and these decisions were usually approved, but not dictated by larger

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<sup>39</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 54.

church associations.

The Baptist Church had national, regional, county, and state associations, and churches were all incorporated into at least one association, but each church still had autonomy and voting rights within the Baptist Associations. The Philadelphia Baptist Association became widely regarded among other Associations in the United States; many Associations and churches quoted their disagreements, decisions, and beliefs. In 1820, South Carolina had seven Associations that met annually to deliberate “on the general interests of the union; give their advice in cases of difficulty and doubt; recommend measures of general utility; correspond with other associations and public bodies,. . .address a pastoral letter to the churches they represent . . . and to enforce the duties which the gospel enjoins.”<sup>40</sup> Looking to the minutes of the Kentucky Elkhorn Association in the years 1793, 1799, 1801, and 1809 shows that over the years, little changed regarding the running of these association meetings. Prayer and sermon started each meeting day off properly and the business at hand included whether to admit new churches to the association, documenting the current practices of member churches, and hearing requests to send missionaries to Indian tribes or underrepresented areas.<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, even in powerful Associations, the Association never had the final say.

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<sup>40</sup> [Rev. Dr. Furman], “View of the present state of the Baptist Churches in South Carolina,” *The Latter Day Luminary (1818-1825)*, August 1820. <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=62635599&Fmt=6&clientId=17675&RQT=309&VName=HNP> (accessed 02 December 2007).

<sup>41</sup> Elkhorn Association of Baptists, “Minutes of the Elk-horn Association of Baptists: held at Bryan's, Fayette County, May 18, 1793. And continued by adjournments until the 21<sup>st</sup>,” *Early American Imprints, First series* (New York : Readex Microprint, 1985), microfiche, 25442.

Elkhorn Association of Baptists, “Minutes of the Elkhorn Association of Babtists [sic]: held at the Great Crossings, Scott County, Kentucky, August 10th, 11th and 12th, 1799,” *Early American Imprints, First series* (New York : Readex Microprint, 1985), microfiche, 48788.

Elkhorn Association of Baptists. “Minutes of the Elkhorn Association of Baptists, held at South-Elkhorn, Fayette County, Kentucky, August, Saturday the 8th, 1801.” Lexington, KY: James H. Stewart, 1801. <http://ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/login?url=http://opac.newsbank.com/select/shaw/112> (accessed 23 September 2007).

Elkhorn Association of Baptists. “Minutes of the Elkhorn Association of Baptists, held at South-Elkhorn, Fayette County, on Saturday the 12th of August, 1809, and continued by adjournment till the 14<sup>th</sup>.” Lexington, KY?: 1809. <http://ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/login?url=http://opac.newsbank.com/select/shaw/16912> (accessed 23

Baptist churches had their own powers and privileges, and no ultimate, central authority existed to force churches into submission.

The evangelical spirit in the churches, though, meant that the Baptists, and often all evangelical faiths, were prone to men who tried to usurp power and claim that they had a new connection to the Lord. To control men who sought ways around the rules, Associations did act to notify all churches of recalcitrant believers. This way, they found it difficult to remove themselves to another church in order to avoid censure. Additionally, by appealing to the bible, Baptist ministers explained to their congregations that if they attempted to ignore, usurp, or undermine the power of the church, they were rebelling against Jesus' laws.<sup>42</sup> Members who appealed to individual liberty got no sympathy. Man may have liberty and natural rights on Earth, but he still must do what the Bible said. Baptists interpreted the Bible to support their institutions, so they believed that people who opposed those institutions were not acting on God's side.

Women in many Baptist churches lost the right to vote on church matters around the time of the Revolutionary War, as the churches were moving towards a more orthodox and accepted position within the larger society. Well-known Baptist minister Jesse Mercer believed that since voting was a matter of the church government, women need not take part.<sup>43</sup> While this was quite a disappointment to active female Baptists, they still retained power in the realm of discipline. Most churches, especially in the South, continued the practice of women judging and voting on discipline cases for both genders.<sup>44</sup> Even if these women did not have the right to vote on who the new minister would be, they still exercised power in the most important aspect of church life:

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<sup>42</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 46.

<sup>43</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 51.

<sup>44</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 52.

discipline. They would charge people with crimes, and they held roles on committees that investigated men as well as other women.

African Americans also had power in discipline hearings. They were often appointed to committees to investigate each other. Sometimes these took the form of special all-black committees, and some churches even placed them on biracial committees to try both blacks and whites.<sup>45</sup> Biracial committees happened in the South just as in the North, but because of the limitations of slave involvement in discipline hearings, they were usually only composed of free African-Americans. The Baptists provided African Americans with more rights than other Evangelical churches when they stayed in white congregations, but of course many of them chose to form their own congregations. For those who stayed in white congregations, though, they often had regular Sunday conferences before or after the service so that they could hold discipline hearings for the slaves who could not take off Saturdays, and churches generally accommodated them with “seats in the body of the church.”<sup>46</sup> They would provide blacks with a sense that they had control in their churches, and while many of the all-black congregations had minimal white oversight, some of them even ran entirely independent of the white congregations.<sup>47</sup> These independent black congregations helped blacks gain spiritual maturity and independence, which affected their ability to form their own churches as the years progressed.

Discipline overseen by congregants, more than anything else, made democratic churches possible. The Baptists would have been democratic even without discipline committees and strict enforcement of discipline, based solely on their Associations and direct communication with God,

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<sup>45</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 54.

<sup>46</sup> “ART. V.--Proceedings of the meeting in Charleston, S. C., May 13-15, 1845, on the Religious Instruction of the Negroes, together with the Report of the Commit.” *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review (1837-1871)*. October 1845. <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=343312321&Fmt=6&clientId=17675&RQT=309&VName=HNP> (accessed 05 December 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-*

but their discipline methods played a key role in supporting the other democratic elements of the church. The dichotomy helped the church to flourish. If members had been able to do as they please just because churches had autonomy and everyone was able to speak directly to God, there never would have been a cohesive movement. Discipline put everyone in their place while maintaining enough egalitarian rights that the majority of Baptists did not feel the need to rebel.

### **Part Three: Retaining Members**

Baptist church discipline became a process that not only kept members in line but also contributed to the retention of members by providing uniform discipline within every congregation, expecting unfaltering discipline from the beginning of membership and therefore ridding the church of those without likeminded beliefs, and administering discipline with love and brotherly compassion. Because of Baptist conservatism, the rules in Baptist churches were often more strict than other evangelical churches, such as the Methodists, so members had a very narrowly defined community of likeminded believers.

Strict discipline was imposed from the moment that a person joined the church. He or she was immediately expected to follow Baptist practices and refrain from worldly amusements, so people who could not cope with that either never made it to church membership or found themselves deserting or excommunicated very shortly after joining. Instead of baptizing people who repeatedly did not follow the gospel rules, as other evangelical churches did in the attempts to reform them, every member was generally in agreement and already tested for proper behavior. There, of course, were still people who went to hear sermons or take place in prayer meetings since antebellum America often did not provide all citizens with the opportunity to worship at their congregation of choice, but they had cursory roles in the church. If a person could not adhere to the expected discipline practices, he would never become a member and therefore never vote on



formal church matters or take the Lord's Supper.<sup>48</sup> While such standards may seem harsh, true believers were glad to submit to the requirements. No church members were children or unhappy converts. By only having adult baptism, everyone who joined wanted to be there and follow the rules that they believed got them into heaven. Since a true saint knew that discipline restored them in the eyes of God, "Baptists never had to fear that discipline might cause one of the elect to reject God and the church, for the excluded 'brother[,] if he is a true child of God[,] will repent and never rest until he gets back into the fold.'"<sup>49</sup>

Letters of dismissal became a way to retain faithful and pious congregants in a largely unsettled and itinerant country. These were given to church members who planned to move away from a specific church or sought to relocate to a new church closer to their home. They were given to any member in good standing as a letter of reference. Since there was no other way to prove one's baptism and faith, letters of dismissal helped make sure that people looked for and were admitted into another Baptist congregation even if they moved. They were only given to mobile members who the church felt proud to recommend to another church, so they helped enforce church discipline in an informal way. Members were expected to find a new Baptist church even if they moved away, and they would find it much easier to do so if they asked for a dismissal. Churches were sometimes leery to welcome a new community member solely on his or her word, but good Baptists knew that they should immediately find "some sister church where they may enjoy their privileges as members, and where they may be watched over by their brethren."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15.

<sup>49</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 17. Internal quotation cited by Wills from Church Book, LaGrange First Baptist Church, LaGrange, GA, 28 September 1890, MU.

<sup>50</sup> B., "Things to Be Set in Order in the Churches," *The American Baptist Magazine and Missionary Intelligencer (1817-1824)*, (1 November 1818), 443 [article online]; available from <http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/pqdweb?index=1&did=76734179&SrchMode=1&sid=5&Fmt=6&VInst=PR&OD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1190839233&clientId=17675>; Internet; (accessed

Dismissal letters were given only to those who were disciplined, and they made sure that believers continued their disciplined lifestyle under the watchful eye of other Baptists even when far removed from their town of birth.

The same dismissal papers that were useful tools for the retention of pious members were also inappropriately obtained by some sinners in an attempt to hide their offense and escape punishment. If there was any doubt that lapsing members knew what they were doing was wrong and sinful, the occurrence of people asking for dismissal papers right after they committed a sin proves their awareness of church expectations. Sometimes, members who feared a trial for a digression would ask for a dismissal letter and try to switch congregations quickly to avoid public airing of their sins. Unfortunately for the sinner, though, since Baptists all maintained the same standards of discipline, if they later learned of the transgression, the person was immediately excommunicated, their letter of dismissal was revoked, and if they already joined another congregation, that congregation was alerted.<sup>51</sup> A congregation may have been primarily worried over their own purity, but they still would not wish to taint another congregation by sending a straying member to them.

Baptist rhetoric often implied that discipline was the foundation of Baptist piety. In 1858, in his *A Treatise of Church Order*, theologian J.L. Dagg asserted that “When discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it,” but that was not a new sentiment to the church.<sup>52</sup> Baptists always believed that discipline was one of the things that kept their church pure. Instead of suggesting that some rules were placed in the Bible to be followed only in the specific confines in which they were written, the Bible was the final word on proper behavior. Faced with the choice of the Lord

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<sup>51</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 43.

<sup>52</sup> J.L. Dagg, *A Treatise of Church Order* (Charleston: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1858), 274.

supporting their church or getting an opportunity to dance or gamble, it does not seem surprising that Baptists decided that following the rules might be best.

Brotherly love was, and still remains, a concept close to the heart of every Baptist, so it is fitting that they discussed discipline as a form of love that illustrated concern for someone else's eternal soul. Much like a parent may believe that he tells his children, "no," because he loves them, Baptists believed that making sure that their fellow brethren behaved properly was a sign of affection. Family and friends were expected to tattle on offenders. While this could be seen as detrimental to the ties of brotherhood, Baptists maintained that it was the role of the church as outlined in the scriptures. "Christians are directed to 'admonish one another.' Rom. Xv. 14" states an essay on church discipline from 1818.<sup>53</sup> Because of its democratic structure, it was just expected that people other than the minister could castigate members, and by keeping in mind that "Love is the grand secret of church discipline, and will do more than all other things put together towards insuring success," Baptists ensured that the system of accusing each other did not become something that members actively dreaded.<sup>54</sup>

### Conclusion

Church discipline began its decline from the public sphere of the church as early as the 1820s and 1830s, and by 1850, Baptists leaders became more interested in reforming society as a whole than maintaining the individual morality of their congregants. Ministers and their congregations began to support or participate in missionary societies to convert people,

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<sup>53</sup> "Church Discipline." *The Religious Intelligencer . . . Containing the Principal Transactions of the Various Bible and Missionary Societies, with Particular Accounts of Revivals of Religion (1816-1837)*, (7 November 1818), 361 [article online]; available from <http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/pqdweb?index=0&did=822467902&SrchMode=1&sid=6&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1190839426&clientId=17675>; Internet; (accessed 18 September 2007).

<sup>54</sup> "Church Discipline." *The Religious Intelligencer . . . Containing the Principal Transactions of the Various Bible and Missionary Societies, with Particular Accounts of Revivals of Religion (1816-1837)*, (7 November 1818), 361 [article online]; available from <http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy.library.unlv.edu/pqdweb?index=0&did=822467902&SrchMode=1&sid=6&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309>

temperance societies to sober people, and other social reform movements to mold society to their view of perfection. As Wills suggests, “the more evangelicals purified the society, the less they felt the urgency of a discipline that separated the church from the world.”<sup>55</sup> The shift was not away from disciplined people, it was from public committees of discipline. The growth of cities was believed to affect the strength of discipline. There were appealing new forms of leisure to be found in the cities, such as public dances, and urban churches had to contend with more members taking part in these pastimes of which they did not approve. Discipline in regards to leisure activities became lax in urban congregations, and rural Baptists became annoyed by their ministers following rules that were no longer universal.<sup>56</sup> When the aspect of universality left discipline, so did its support. The expectations of a pious Baptist did not change, but the ability to control the average member did. A shift had begun slowly to move away from publicly explaining and punishing members of their private sins: the church no longer sought to dominate “the private realm of the household.”<sup>57</sup>

Discipline had attracted converts and controlled them for years, but as Baptist memberships shifted from being a majority of converts to people whose families were traditionally Baptist, discipline was ingrained in the family obligation of Baptists. Discipline was still necessary, but growing up in the church, even if a person was not a member until adulthood, meant he or she understood how to mete out discipline without everyone in the community getting involved. While there still were people willing to admit the digressions of their family and friends, it was not expected any more. Discipline had filled its roll in that capacity. The contemporary

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9&VName=HNP&TS=1190839426&clientId=17675; Internet; (accessed 18 September 2007).

<sup>55</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10.

<sup>56</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130.

<sup>57</sup> Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 249-250.

sources take for granted this shift, but it seems reasonable to assume that this happened in part because Baptists felt a greater need for privacy.

Additionally, as the Baptist church grew in numbers it had fewer fears for young upstarts. In the 1830s, Primitive Baptists split off from the main denomination because of disagreements over the Biblical basis of benevolent societies and other missionary and community morality efforts.<sup>58</sup> Baptists seemed to express little worry over the loss of their former brothers and sisters. Their numbers were insignificant in the full-fledged, healthy denomination. While Christian discipline still maintained its role in keeping Baptists from going against the word of their ministers, it no longer mattered in the larger Baptist community how those who did disagree were treated. Excommunication or voluntary desertion no longer threatened the existence of whole congregations.

Discipline strengthened Baptist churches in America by building a community where democracy and deference could coexist. Eighteenth and nineteenth century ministers used discipline with love, and suggested that their congregations do the same, in order to foster a community where strict rules and compassion pursued the aims of the Lord. Crispus, explained it as a duty “necessary for the servant of Christ to call the attention of his brethren to subjects with which they are already well acquainted.”<sup>59</sup> Baptist church discipline created a religious experience that promoted democratic principles and ordered worship consonant with the ideals of the early republic. As the church became more established, discipline itself was not what disappeared; it was the outer functions such as discipline committees and Saturday meetings that fell out of practice. Discipline was the only way that Baptist churches could maintain their egalitarian flair

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<sup>58</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>59</sup> Crispus, “Thoughts on Church Discipline,” *The Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine*, (December 1812), 244 [article online]; available from <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=828388692&Fmt=6&clientId=>

without letting sin and rebellion take hold, and until the church was established enough to let discipline progress on its own in the homes of Baptist believers, those institutions were needed.

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