

# The Forgotten Side of Church Discipline

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A few years ago I attended a breakfast meeting for local Baptist ministers. Being a new pastor, I looked forward to meeting the men and engaging in fruitful discussion. In the midst of the friendly discourse the topic of church discipline emerged, and the tone of the conversation grew pointed. One older, retired pastor said, in essence, that church discipline should not be exercised today since it is divisive and leads to legalism. He was speaking of corrective church discipline, as addressed in other articles in this journal, and for him it had no place in contemporary ecclesiastical life.

Unfortunately, this type of hostile attitude towards church discipline is pervasive in North American Protestant churches. It is an attitude that reveals, among other things, a poor ecclesiology, a pitiful grasp of Scripture and the positive unifying purpose of corrective discipline taught therein, and a propensity to view church discipline in an extremely narrow fashion. This brief article is devoted to addressing this last problem—the propensity to view church discipline narrowly. My breakfast acquaintance only related church discipline to the subject of correction. He forgot that the church's task of discipline also involves providing a framework for spiritual formation. This forgotten side of discipline must also be reestablished in the churches, and such a reformation may prove to be the key step in helping churches extol the virtue of biblical discipline.

## **Church Discipline: A Binary Concept**

To understand church discipline properly, we must first broaden our horizon concerning the subject. Church discipline is, in actuality, a binary concept rooted in Scripture that seeks to accomplish at least four goals. These goals are: (1) to build a regenerate church membership; (2) to mature believers in the faith; (3) to strengthen the church for evangelism and the engagement of culture; and (4) to protect the church from inner decay.<sup>1</sup>

Writers who have addressed the subject from this broader perspective have thus spoken of church discipline by using two headings. Reformatory or corrective church discipline refers to discipline administered for the purpose of guiding an erring believer away from sin. If the believer willfully persists in sin, he should be removed from the church to protect the body from his detrimental influence. The goal of such discipline, even if removal becomes necessary, remains restorative; it is never punitive. Formative church discipline is broader than corrective discipline and refers to the nurture of believers through instruction and their shared life in the body. Findley Edge defines formative church discipline as follows:

Formative church discipline is that process of teaching and training by which the Christian is increasingly formed in the image of Christ. . . . In Christian nurture disciples subject themselves to the discipline of Christ. This process is lifelong in

scope and is not optional in nature. The purpose of this discipline is to equip individual [sic] to fulfill the missions for which they were called as Christians. Formative discipline is exercised in the Christian community as the members express genuine concern for one another and become dynamically involved with one another in deep interpersonal relationships, recognizing that all are held accountable by God for their stewardship of life. Its purpose is to enlighten, encourage, stimulate, support, and sustain one another and the group in the discipline under which they live and in the fulfillment of their divine mission.

In formative discipline both the individual and the church have a responsibility. The individual has a responsibility to enter into the transforming relationship with Christ in which the motive—the impelling desire—for growth is present. The church does not supply the individual with the desire to grow, but the church is responsible for seeking to provide those conditions in which the individual is encouraged to enter into a genuine encounter with Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Formative church discipline is related to the overall evangelism/discipleship ministry of the church. The church is called to make disciples, and that command encompasses not only proclaiming the gospel and leading persons to a commitment to Jesus Christ, but also baptizing them and teaching them to observe all things commanded by Christ, with a view toward their becoming fruit-bearing, reproducing disciples (Matt 28:18-20).<sup>3</sup> To be a disciple of Jesus entails discipline, the words are related etymologically. Those who begin to follow Christ enter into a life of disciplined learning (Matt 11:28-30). Formative discipline relates to the educational framework established by the church to aid believers in this process of learning and maturation. When, therefore, the topic of church discipline is discussed

it should be done within this wholistic framework. Proper church discipline is both formative and reformative.

## **Two Areas of Implementation**

In order to implement formative discipline effectively, churches must give attention to two areas. First, churches must incorporate formative discipline into the reception of new members and the initiation of new believers into the visible body of Christ. Second, attention must be given to building formative discipline into the overall, continuing discipleship/teaching ministry of the church.

### *Discipline at the Door*

Events of recent decades have sparked renewed interest in implementing formative discipline at the front door of the church. In short, a growing number of congregations in the free church tradition,<sup>4</sup> built through voluntary church membership, have become alarmed over the fact that large numbers of the volunteers are nowhere to be found. Nominality is rampant and the churches are plagued with an immense “backdoor” problem.<sup>5</sup> Some churches and denominations have sought to address this problem by giving greater attention to the reception of applicants into the church membership. Such has been the case within the largest Protestant group in North America, the Southern Baptist Convention.<sup>6</sup>

Leaders in the SBC became increasingly alarmed at the backdoor problem in the churches in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The era was one of marked advance for the denomination as evidenced by the fact that during the decade 1945-1955, the convention’s churches grew five times more rapidly than the growth rate of the United States.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the

convention's churches found themselves with massive numbers of nonresident and inactive members.<sup>8</sup> Denominational leaders began to sound the alarm,<sup>9</sup> and as a result, several actions were taken in the following decades. Most of those actions centered on formative discipline.

The convention encouraged churches to offer training to all new members after they joined or were baptized. For approximately a decade, the convention promoted a "pastor's class," which utilized a brief book for the pastors to teach new members. Then, from around 1965-1977, the convention promoted age-graded new church member training and produced two sets of material that could be taught in either four or thirteen weeks. From the late 1970s forward, more attention was given to working with individuals to help them establish spiritual disciplines in the first fifty days of their new life in Christ. Material was produced and strategies were developed to do a better job with persons at the point of commitment. Churches were encouraged to utilize material to train laypersons to serve as decision counselors. These counselors would take persons responding to a public invitation to a separate room in order to give them individual attention. Information was also made available to help churches train sponsors to work with new members for several weeks as they were assimilated into a local body of believers.<sup>10</sup> In the 1980s and early 90s, a comprehensive plan was developed that sought to utilize the various materials developed by the convention for working with new believers and other new members.<sup>11</sup>

While this activity was commendable, it ultimately did not result in marked improvement in the churches. As Chip Miller reported recently, 31.8 percent of

Southern Baptist church members can be considered nonresident. Furthermore, 20.7 percent of Southern Baptist church members who still live as residents in the community where their church membership lies are inactive. Thus, roughly 52.5 percent of Southern Baptist church members are inactive.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps part of the reason for the ineffectiveness of this approach was that most of the material was intended to be taught at night in discipleship classes. Unfortunately, attendance was declining on Sunday evenings during much of this era, and multitudes who were baptized failed to attend the small groups for new members.<sup>13</sup> The greater problem, however, was that the churches were captive to a methodology rooted in revivalism<sup>14</sup> when it came to handling applicants for church membership. This method precluded the implementation of any genuine formative discipline, and it undermined the churches' ability to build a regenerate church membership.<sup>15</sup>

The ultimate impact of revivalism on SBC churches manifested itself in worship services and the time of commitment at the conclusion of the sermon. In most SBC congregations, a call for immediate response concluded the message.<sup>16</sup> Persons who felt the need to respond or who desired to make a commitment "walked the aisle" and were greeted by the pastor. While not universally true, the person was usually counseled at the front of the auditorium, and if the pastor felt comfortable with their commitment, he would immediately present them to the congregation who would vote affirmatively to accept the candidate into membership. Baptism would follow for those professing faith in Christ, usually that evening or on the following Sunday. After accep-

tance into membership, the church, if it had training available, would encourage the new member to attend a class.<sup>17</sup>

This approach precluded effective formative discipline since initiates were received into membership without even knowing the expectations for church membership. Such expectations were often spelled out in church constitutions and covenants, but these were no longer consulted, and in most cases new members were unaware of their contents. Weak commitment to the church followed, since little commitment was expected upon entering the fold. This method also made it certain that the churches received many unregenerate people into membership. Despite the assurances of some denominational leaders, who stressed that careful attention was bestowed on applicants for membership, Southern Baptist practice was, in fact, shoddy. Individuals were baptized and received into membership on a verbal profession that often amounted to nothing more than nodding in the affirmative when the pastor queried them, asking them if they had “received Jesus into their hearts.”<sup>18</sup>

There were leaders in SBC life who criticized these practices. J. W. MacGorman, a professor at Southwestern Seminary, hurled some of the more colorful barbs. He referred to this practice as “credobaptism.” “Credobaptism,” rooted in the Latin word “credo,” meaning I believe, was, according to MacGorman, the practice of baptizing people upon the simple profession “I believe.”<sup>19</sup> His contention was that through this practice, many unregenerate people were being added to the church rolls. No one should have been surprised, therefore, when these individuals quickly lost interest in the church or made no attempt to submit

themselves to new member training.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, this approach continues to be dominant in SBC churches. Readers can perhaps take heart, however, in the fact that a transition is apparently underway towards a model that takes greater care with persons applying for membership or responding to an invitation to become followers of Christ.<sup>21</sup> Churches are recovering the forgotten side of church discipline, and whether they are aware of it or not, they are returning to a model with deep roots in church history. Again, within the Southern Baptist tradition, we find this model of higher requirement to be more consistent with historic Baptist ecclesiology.

Theologian James Leo Garrett joined a chorus of other voices in the past decades and raised concerns about how Southern Baptists were receiving new people into the churches. He noted that in the past, Baptists gave meticulous attention to their work with new believers coming into the church. He argued that, “Historically speaking, Anabaptist and early Baptist concern for the regeneracy of particular churches was focused upon two principal aspects of church life, namely, the admission of members to the congregation and the proper maintenance of the congregational membership.”<sup>22</sup> Garrett brought forth sources to demonstrate his contention, the most noteworthy of which was the discipline adopted in 1773 by the Charleston Baptist Association—the first Baptist association in the south.<sup>23</sup>

This document focused, in part, upon the reception of church members and contended that care and discretion should be exercised in this matter. In short, only those who evidenced regeneration were to be admitted. This requirement is clearly seen in statements such as, “None is fit

material of a gospel church without having first experienced an entire change of nature,” and “Let those look to it who make the Church of Christ a harlot by opening the door of admission so wide as to permit unbelievers, unconverted, and graceless persons to crowd into it without control.”<sup>24</sup> Churches were encouraged, in addition to this issue of regeneration, to pay attention to the candidate’s grasp of essential doctrines and character formation. Thus we find in chapter three of the discipline, regarding candidates for membership:

They should be persons of some competent knowledge of divine and spiritual things, who have not only knowledge of themselves, of their lost state by nature, and of the way of salvation by Christ, but have some degree of knowledge of God in his nature, perfection, and works; of Christ in his person as the Son of God, of his proper deity, of his incarnation, and of his offices as prophet, priest, and king; of justification by his righteousness, pardon by his blood, satisfaction by his sacrifice, and his prevalent intercession of the Spirit of God—his person, offices, and operations; and of the important truths of the gospel and the doctrines of grace. Or how otherwise should the church be the pillar and ground of truth?

Their lives and conversations ought to be such as “becometh the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27); that is, holy, just, and upright (Psalm 15:1-2); if their practice contradicts their profession they are not to be admitted to church membership. Holiness is becoming the Lord’s house forever (Psalm 93:5).

These ought to be truly baptized in water, i.e., by immersion, upon a profession of their faith, agreeable to the ancient practice of John the Baptist and the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 3:6; John 3:23; Rom. 6:4; Acts 8: 36-38).<sup>25</sup>

Baptists focused upon these three

issues (regeneration attested to by clear testimony, foundational doctrinal knowledge, and character formation) as they worked with new believers and other applicants for church membership. While certainly this approach was not ubiquitously practiced, and only partially employed in some locales, it reflected the ideal in the minds of the majority of Baptists. Persons applying for membership were expected to possess a testimony concerning how they had been converted. They were expected to have some grasp of Christian doctrine and to be striving after holiness.

Baptist literature is replete with examples of this approach. Ample support was available to aid Baptists in this task and to reinforce the concept of a regenerate church membership. Baptists produced church manuals or disciplines that were available to the churches. These disciplines were, according to Bobby Dale Compton, “treatises on church order which concisely discuss the nature of the church, its membership, ministry, and worship. They seek to provide a better understanding of Baptist polity and practice to lead churches in orderly conduct.”<sup>26</sup> These disciplines, like the one adopted by the Charleston Baptist Association, encouraged churches to retain high requirements for persons entering the church.<sup>27</sup>

Baptists also utilized catechisms to instruct both children and adults. These catechisms were used specifically in evangelism and to train children.<sup>28</sup> While not used specifically to train converts awaiting baptism as in the early church, catechisms came to serve a similar purpose of training children.<sup>29</sup>

Church covenants were also used to foster formative discipline in Baptist life.

Whereas church confessions of faith recorded the doctrines held dear by the churches, covenants focused more upon the ethical expectations of the congregations and what they required of the members.<sup>30</sup> Those being admitted into the churches were often required to sign the covenant, pledging to strive towards the ideals expressed therein.<sup>31</sup>

We can conclude that churches with high requirements are returning to the practices of their forefathers. Formative discipline began at the door of the church with high requirements and expectations.<sup>32</sup> From the small churches on the American frontier,<sup>33</sup> to the great churches with deep roots in Baptist history, formative discipline was a key component in the process of working with new believers. Baptists found this method beneficial for both the convert and the church. This sentiment was clearly expressed in the discipline followed by the Metropolitan Tabernacle, pastored by Charles Haddon Spurgeon. In the late nineteenth century, this church was perhaps the most influential congregation in the world, and its shadow is cast to this day. Charles' brother J. A. Spurgeon who oversaw the daily ministry of the megachurch recorded their approach. He wrote:

All persons anxious to join our church are requested to apply personally upon any Wednesday evening, between six and nine o'clock, to the elders, two or more of whom attend in rotation every week for the purpose of seeing enquirers. When satisfied, the case is entered by the elder in one of a set of books provided for the purpose, and a card is given bearing a corresponding number to the page of the book in which particulars of the candidate's experience are recorded. Once a month, or oftener when required, the junior pastor appoints a day to see the persons thus

approved of by the elders. If the pastor is satisfied, he nominates an elder or church member as visitor, and at the next church meeting asks the church to send him to enquire as to the moral character and repute of the candidate. If the visitor be satisfied he requests the candidate to attend with him at the following or next convenient church meeting, to come before the church and reply to such questions as may be put from the chair, mainly with a view to elicit expressions of his trust in the Lord Jesus, and the hope of salvation through his blood, and any such facts of his spiritual history as may convince the church of the genuineness of the case. We have found this a means of grace and a rich blessing. None need apprehend that modesty is outraged, or timidity appalled by the test thus applied. We have never yet found it tend to keep members out of our midst, while we have known it of service of detecting a mistake or satisfying a doubt previously entertained. We deny that it keeps away any worth having. Surely if their Christianity cannot stand before a body of believers and speak amongst loving sympathising hearts it is as well to ask if it be the cross-bearing public confessing faith of the Bible? This is no matter of flesh and blood, but of faith and grace, and we should be sorry to give place to the weakness and shrinking of the flesh, so as to insult the omnipotence of grace, by deeming it unable to endure so much as the telling in the gates of Zion what great things God has done for the soul.<sup>34</sup>

Contemporary churches desiring to implement formative discipline at the front door of the church can take heart in the fact that they are returning to the faith of their forefathers. May more find their way home in this area of ecclesiastical life.

### *Teaching Them To Observe All Things*

As noted earlier in this article, formative discipline encompasses the entire

scope of Christian discipleship. It is, as Edge defined, a process that is “lifelong in scope and is not optional in nature.”<sup>35</sup> In essence, a church has an obligation to order its corporate life so that it teaches believers to observe all things commanded by Jesus (Matt 28:20). Unfortunately, many congregations give little thought to this matter. If it exists at all in the church’s corporate life, discipleship is implemented haphazardly and with little expectation for member involvement. Formative discipline needs to be applied in the life of the church in a systematic fashion so that a culture is created that fosters spiritual formation. This culture will be one in which spiritual growth can naturally occur within the planned corporate life of the congregation. Three areas thus deserve careful attention.

First, attention needs to be given to the weekly preaching ministry. The pastor must strive to preach the whole counsel of God. The most effective way to accomplish this task is through expository preaching through books of the Bible. Over time, therefore, the pastor should attempt to preach through every book of the Bible. The pastor should also preach in a manner that helps the congregation grasp the larger picture of the biblical narrative. Moreover, he must preach in a way that clarifies and explains the categories of systematic theology. His preaching must also apply the teaching to the contemporary situation of the listeners so that they can apply what they are taught, thus finding ownership of their evangelical faith.

Second, attention should be given to the entire teaching ministry of the church. The best models feature two essential ingredients. First is that members are required or expected to be involved in a

small group that is structured to aid in spiritual maturation. Second, a model is employed that provides incentives for the believer to press forward in their walk with Christ. In these models, classes are also offered that are sequenced to reflect further steps in discipleship.<sup>36</sup>

Third, churches should deliberately think through their corporate existence. They must seek to build genuine Christian community where believers can “spur one another on to love and good deeds” (Heb 10:23), and where they can teach and encourage one another in the midst of a loving community. At this point, corrective church discipline enters to complete the picture of church discipline. Not only should it be restorative, its goal should be for the community to help the erring brother or sister to grow through the process.<sup>37</sup> Further, they simply should not tolerate members who are inactive or non-resident. How can the church fulfill its call to teach disciples to obey all things commanded when they are nowhere to be found?<sup>38</sup>

While one can always find something to criticize in someone else’s model, churches that are seeking to move toward the ideals expressed in this article should be commended and emulated in a broad sense.

### **Areas of Concern**

Pastors who desire to lead their congregations to employ a model rooted in formative discipline should be prepared to encounter three objections. One objection will be the fear that high requirements will drive people away. Actually, the evidence argues to the contrary. High requirements actually draw people, and in the long run will be a great aid to growth.<sup>39</sup>

A second objection will arise from some who have experienced salvation through revivalism. For them, walking the aisle is a rite of passage, and they see this act as one's public profession of faith. While some minds will not be changed, congregations, moved by the large numbers of inactive people on their rolls, will perhaps find the courage to shift when informed from history and educated through the Word of God. Historically, as demonstrated in this brief article, some of the methods of revivalism are a deviation from historic practice. Congregations should be informed about how their forefathers worked with those entering the local church. Further, they can be taught that in the believer's church tradition, baptism is the place where one publicly declares his or her faith in Christ and enters into the visible community of faith.<sup>40</sup> Some congregations have introduced changes by addition rather than subtraction. They have kept the invitation approach, but they have added ways people can respond, such as completing a decision or commitment card in response to the message. Someone then contacts the person for spiritual counsel and to inform them of the subsequent steps to take.<sup>41</sup>

The third and strongest objection will come from those who oppose any waiting period or training before baptism. The objection will flow from the contention that in the New Testament, baptism appears to have been performed immediately upon profession of faith. Thus, to delay or to require training before baptism is to violate the Word of God. Through the years various responses have been offered to this objection. One offered by Findley Edge was to have a two-tiered membership. He wrote, "'Professing members' would be those who have been received

on the basis of their 'profession of faith.' 'Full members' would have to demonstrate the reality of their profession by 'credible evidence.'"<sup>42</sup> Others have suggested that baptism be viewed as a universal church ordinance and administered immediately upon profession, yet separated from church membership altogether. In my mind, both approaches are unnecessary.

The evidence is clear that the pattern followed in the Bible was one that did administer baptism relatively quickly.<sup>43</sup> The question we must raise, however, is did this practice continue, even in the New Testament era, as Christian patterns of worship became more established, and they gathered on the Lord's Day (Rev. 1:10; 1 Cor. 16.2)? On this point, the New Testament appears to be silent. While Stein gives the scenario of one being converted and baptized on the same day in response to a sermon, were not individuals led to Christ in other ways and on other days besides Sunday?<sup>44</sup> Were these individuals baptized right away when the church was not gathered, since, evidently, the pattern of daily gatherings in Acts passed away?<sup>45</sup> It would seem that perhaps a separation developed out of necessity in the conversion process, if baptism was to be utilized as a sign of initiation into the community. Further, we do know that by 100 A. D. baptism was not administered right away but was preceded by a period of training.<sup>46</sup>

There is no easy answer to this issue. Certainly the New Testament knows nothing of unbaptized believers, and we are commanded to baptize and teach them. If we baptize quickly upon unverified profession, we fulfill neither command since most would exit out the back almost as quickly as they came through the front. I



would gingerly put forth the contention, being ready to stand corrected, that while the pattern in the New Testament was to baptize quickly, this approach is not prescribed in the New Testament.<sup>47</sup> While baptism should be administered soon after conversion,<sup>48</sup> I do not find preparing a person for baptism over a period of a few weeks unbiblical.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, baptizing persons simply upon an unverified profession is unbiblical. There should be enough time between his or her “Lord, Lord” and baptism to see if there is evidence of genuine repentance. In most Baptist churches we wait at least a week before we baptize persons upon conversion, and I do not believe that we are in violation of the New Testament. If we allow ourselves to wait a week, is there some theological prohibition in waiting a bit more to see if this person truly desires to be initiated into the community of believers? Could we not present their baptism as the final initiation in their new walk with Christ, and help them prepare for a glorious time in which they share their testimony and what they have been learning since they started their journey with Jesus? My answers are obvious.

### **The Choice Before Us**

This article has sought to set forth the necessity of congregations to return to a model that employs formative church discipline. It has shown that clear precedent is found for this practice in the history of the believer’s church. The article has further exposed the problem created through lax evangelistic and discipleship practices. Churches can continue to function in these unhealthy patterns or they can return to the practices of their forefathers and build congregations that are unified in doctrine, purpose, and ethical vision. If they will

return, these churches will retain more people and have a greater impact upon the world.

Findley Edge voiced the decision that lies before the churches some years ago. His words bear repeating as we enter a new millennium.

The churches today face a difficult question. Shall they continue the relatively easy type of religion which can be popular and thus appeal to the masses; or shall they submit themselves to the difficult and radical element of discipline and self-denial which was characteristic of the New Testament faith? Since the masses tend to avoid suffering, this way cannot be popular. The present generation has grown up in this popular, easy religion. Because this is all the religion they know, they tend to feel that this is what religion ought to be. But in more thoughtful moments there comes the haunting and disturbing thought that perhaps—just perhaps—the difficult way, the way of radical change, may be the only way to power, the only way to vital experiential religion.

Thus, the church today is called upon to go through the painful process of re-evaluating herself—her essential nature, her ministry and mission in the modern world. Because of the difficulties involved these changes will come about only when, and if, the leadership of the church comes to have a deeper and clearer understanding of what the church is and what the church should be about in today’s world.<sup>50</sup>

That choice still lies before churches and leaders today. The question is what will you the reader choose to do with it?

### **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup>Don R. Cox, “Church Discipline in Growing Churches,” *Strategies for Today’s Leader* 33, no. 2 (April-June 1996) 5.

<sup>2</sup>Findley Edge, *A Quest for Vitality in Religion: A Theological Approach to Religious*

*Education*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1994) 178-179. See also, Edwin Charles Dargan, *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Charles T. Dearing, 1905) 551-560. Dargan refers to this process as the church giving attention to the "culture" of its membership. He is referring to the church aiding believers' growth in piety, doctrine, giving, service, and evangelism. Thus, he simply means formative discipline and uses that phrase at the end of the section devoted to these matters. *Ibid.*, 560. Elsewhere, I have defined formative church discipline as "that structure through which the church helps believers become fruit-bearing disciples. It is a ministry of teaching and training within the community of believers whereby Christians are aided in the maturation process. The church has a responsibility to provide the structure and environment for this to happen, and the believer has the obligation to submit to it." Cox, "Church Discipline in Growing Churches," 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> Thus, it becomes apparent that the operating definition of evangelism being followed here is more in keeping with that of the Church Growth Movement. Evangelism does not take place until proclamation of the gospel occurs in some form or fashion, but evangelism is not complete unless it results in fruit-bearing disciples in a local church. For a discussion of the various ways evangelicals have defined evangelism see C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth*, with a foreword by

Ralph D. Winter (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1987) 113-131; J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961); and David Barrett, *Evangelize: A Historical Survey of the Concept* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> See F. H. Littell, *The Free Church* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1957) and Paul Basden and David S. Dockery, eds., *The People of God: Essays on the Believers' Church* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> The terms "frontdoor" and "backdoor" correspond to entrance into church membership and the inability of the church to retain said members respectively. See Joel D. Heck, *New Member Assimilation: Practical Prevention of Backdoor Loss through Frontdoor Care* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1988) for an example of the employment of the terms in this manner.

<sup>6</sup> Henceforth, SBC.

<sup>7</sup> Charles S. Kelley, Jr., *How Did They Do It? The Story of Southern Baptist Evangelism* (New Orleans: Insight Press, 1993) 35.

<sup>8</sup> Nonresident members are those who are on the roll of a church but who are no longer residents of that community. Usually, they are no longer regular participants in any local body of believers as is demonstrated by the fact that they fail to move their membership. In 1950, nonresidents accounted for 26.2 percent of the total membership of SBC churches.

<sup>9</sup> One early voice was that of prominent educator Gaines S. Dobbins who said, "As matters now stand,

if Southern Baptists should add one million new members to their rolls, they would at the same time add approximately six hundred thousand to the number of the unenlisted." Gaines S. Dobbins, "Achieving a Great Goal and Avoiding a Grave Danger," *Review and Expositor* 4, no. 4 (October 1944) 410.

<sup>10</sup> See Don Randall Cox, "The Shifting Role of Formative Church Discipline in the Evangelistic Strategy of Southern Baptist Convention Churches, 1950-1995," (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999) 26-104 for a detailed recounting of the content in this paragraph.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Wingfield, "On Average, Half of Church Members Inactive," *Western Recorder* 172, no. 2 (January 13, 1998) 1.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, the largest number of people reported in new member training during this time was in 1975. 135,099 persons reportedly submitted themselves to it. In the same year, however, 421,809 persons were received by baptism in convention churches. Cox, "Formative Church Discipline," 80.

<sup>14</sup> A distinction should always be made between genuine biblical revival and what has come to be called revivalism. Richard Lovelace succinctly defined revival as "an outpouring of the Holy Spirit which restores the people of God to normal spiritual life after a period of corporate declension. Periods of spiritual decline occur in history because the gravity of indwelling sin keeps pulling believers first into

formal religion and then into open apostasy. Periods of awakening alternate with these as God graciously breathes new life into his people" (Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979] 40). Revivalism is the attempt to make revival routine in the life of the church through the right use of means. In much of American evangelicalism, this approach became institutionalized in the announced "revival meeting" held routinely in the churches. Although his overall thesis is awry, William G. McLoughlin captured the essence of the meaning intended here when he wrote: "Revivalism is the Protestant ritual (at first spontaneous, but, since 1830, routinized) in which charismatic evangelists convey 'the Word' of God to large masses of people who, under this influence, experience what Protestants call conversion, salvation, regeneration, or spiritual rebirth." William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakening, and Reform* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) xiii. With the advent of Charles Finney, who understood revival as phenomenon that could be worked up through the right use of constituted means, revivalism became a standard approach in the churches. Elements such as the call for immediate response, walking down the aisle in response to the message, and an emphasis upon emotion became routine in the weekly practices of many churches. In Southern Baptist life, it is a staple. Thus, revivalism

continues to be a key method in SBC congregations, seen each week in the worship service, and in the "revivals" that are held on a regular basis in which a guest evangelist is employed to come in and draw the net. See Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994); Charles G. Finney, *Revival Lectures* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell); Thom S. Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996); and Kelley, *How Did They Do It?* for further insight into this matter.

<sup>15</sup>By regenerate church membership, the idea that the church is to be composed of genuine believers who have experienced regeneration and conversion is meant. See William H. Brackney, *The Baptists* (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 1994) 37-39.

<sup>16</sup>Please let the reader understand that this article in no way seeks to quarrel with calling persons to immediate response to the gospel or to the use of a public invitation if it is handled correctly.

<sup>17</sup>T. A. Patterson, while pastoring the First Baptist Church of Beaumont, Texas, summarized the SBC approach in an article comparing Southern Baptist practice with that of Northern Baptists. He said: "Southern Baptist churches usually follow another method. They believe that new members should be received when they present themselves for membership. At the same time, they realize that these new people must be assimilated.

Consequently, they often have a 'follow-up' program in which they make an effort to become better acquainted with the new members." T. A. Patterson, "Probation of New Members," *Baptist Standard* 64, no. 15 (April 10, 1952) 17.

<sup>18</sup>C. E. Matthews penned a significant book that proves the point. For nine years, he served as evangelism secretary for the Home Mission Board, and was thus in charge of promoting evangelism in the SBC. His work, *The Southern Baptist Program of Evangelism*, which was in essence a blueprint for conducting the fall and spring "revival meetings," was made available to every Southern Baptist pastor. In this work, Matthews stated that he believed Southern Baptist churches were careful in how they received members and that the reason so many were inactive or nonresident was due to the fact that a better job needed to be done in the area of conservation (i.e., new member training after baptism). Proceeding through the book, however, one comes to see that his argument was faulty. Matthews proffered a couple of examples of proper procedures to be followed by pastor's receiving persons coming for salvation. One he recommended had been put forth by Henry G. Bennett, the late president of Oklahoma A & M College. Bennett suggested the following: "The clerk, or the pastor, should call the name and address so that all present can hear. In response to the name, the person should stand facing the pastor. To one coming for baptism, he can say: 'A few moments ago you assured

me that you were trusting Christ as Saviour. You have had this time to think it over as you sat there. The Bible says "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so." Now, before our church receives you for baptism, all these present want to hear your testimony for Jesus. Are you assured by your own experience that Jesus has saved you?" (Answer should be yes. If not the pastor says: 'We'll discuss this further following the benediction. Please be seated.') When the 'yes' is heard, respond by quoting 1 John 5: 10 'He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself.' Then, in an expectant voice, 'Is there any further word you want to say?' Sometimes heaven will burst forth through a new testimony. The applicant should then stand by the pastor, facing the congregation as the pastor welcomes him by name." C. E. Matthews, *The Southern Baptist Program of Evangelism*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Convention Press, 1956) 142. A further example, that is more disturbing, revolved around presenting a child to the church. "Then suppose a little girl has come forward and has made a clear-cut confession of Christ. Stand her up before the congregation and say something like this: 'Here is a little girl only nine years of age. Her little heart was touched by the love of Jesus. She has come forward. I asked, "How old are you?" "Nine," she answered. "What is it darling, that you want to do?" "I am trusting Jesus as my Saviour,"' was her answer. That is what Jesus wanted her to do, for he said, 'Suffer little children to come unto me and for-

bid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.' If God's way of salvation is so simple that a little child can understand, surely you who are grown and mature would not offer excuses. 'A little child shall lead them.' Then start the music again." Ibid., 101.

<sup>19</sup>J. W. MacGorman, "Vanishing Baptist Distinctive," *The Christian Index* 136, no. 29 (July 18, 1957) 6. To him it was baptism on the basis of "unverified profession." Ibid., 7. MacGorman did not mince words with comments such as, "There ought to be enough time between his 'Lord, Lord,' and his baptism into the membership of the church to afford some basis for determining whether or not his profession is the kind that issues into the doing of the will of God. To do less is 'credobaptism,' baptism upon the basis of unverified profession, and it is no less treacherous than pedobaptism, the baptism of infants. In fact, it is entirely likely that the *Baptist preacher who baptizes a lost man has committed a more grievous error than the Roman Catholic priest who baptizes a safe infant*" (emphasis mine). He further noted, "I have no lack of appreciation for what is meant by 'drawing the net' but I do object most strenuously to the common procedure of baptizing everything that is found in the net. We Southern Baptists are far more adept at 'drawing the net' than we are at 'sorting the catch.' We baptize everything that comes in; catfish, carp, soft-shelled turtles, crawfish, crabs, and every once in a while a vicious, sharp-toothed gar

whom the devil maneuvers into places of leadership in our churches. Thus the practice of 'credobaptism' is another way of violating our historic principle." Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid. MacGorman was right, and this reality surfaced from time to time in SBC literature. C. E. Matthews said more than perhaps he realized when he mentioned the benefit of the book developed for new believer training and utilized in the pastor's class during the 1950s and early 1960s. Regarding one particular chapter in that discipleship book, he said it was helpful because it served as "the stop-gap for disillusioned persons who *unite with the church without experiencing regeneration*. If and when such a thing occurs, the individual who studies and is taught this lesson will discover his mistake and will be shown how to rectify it" (emphasis mine). C. E. Matthews, "Conserving Results of Evangelism," *Southern Baptist Home Missions* 22, no. 3 (March 1951) 11. The book to which he was referring was James Sullivan's *Your Life and Your Church*. It was the key book for follow-up in SBC churches for about a decade. In the early editions of this work, one can see that the problem in SBC evangelistic practice was deeper than a poor methodology of receiving applicants for membership. Through a comment in the book, written by a leading pastor who would go on to head the Baptist Sunday School Board, one could surmise that "easy believism" was being proffered in Southern Baptist evangelism. In the first chapter of

the work, which was used for training persons who had been received into church membership and quickly baptized, Sullivan addressed the issue of Lordship. In essence he called new believers to submit to the Lordship of Christ, which should have been included in the gospel message. Sullivan wrote, "While Jesus is now your Saviour, he is not satisfied with that relationship alone. He wants also to be your Master and Lord. He wanted to save your soul, but he desires, too, to rule your life." James Sullivan, *Your Life and Your Church* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1951) 11. That comment was deleted in later editions.

<sup>21</sup>Comparing two studies of similar sample sizes demonstrates the validity of this statement. One study was conducted by the Sunday School Board of the SBC in the 1960s, and it examined how the churches were receiving and working with new members; the other study was recently crafted and administered by Thom Rainer and focuses on similar issues. In the earlier study, about 10 percent of SBC congregations could be labeled as "high requirement churches." These churches require a new member to receive some training before baptism, often require persons to sign the church covenant, and require them to express a salvation testimony in verbal or written form. In Rainer's study, the percentage of churches roughly following this approach reached 18.2 percent. Thus in the past thirty-five years there has been an increase in "high

requirement churches." See Martin B. Bradley, "A Research Report: Study of Opinion and Practices Concerning the Reception and Orientation of New Members in Southern Baptist Churches" (Nashville: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1965) I-4 and Thom S. Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping Your People in Your Church* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999) 104. Elsewhere, I have argued that this approach is finding new legitimacy in Southern Baptist life due to the influence of the church pastored by Rick Warren. See Cox, "The Shifting Role of Formative Church Discipline," 159-166.

<sup>22</sup>James Leo Garrett, "Seeking a Regenerate Church Membership," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 3 no. 2 (April 1961) 27.

<sup>23</sup>H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987) 217. James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Baptist Church Discipline: A Historical Introduction To the Practices of Baptist Churches with Particular Attention To the Summary of Church Discipline Adopted by the Charleston Baptist Association* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1962) 16. The full title of the original discipline was *A Summary of Church Discipline: Shewing the Qualifications and Duties, of the Officers and Members, of a Gospel-Church. By the Baptist Association in Charleston, South Carolina*, *Ibid.*, 26-27.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 35-36.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 36. Note that baptism was to be administered after these three

issues—conversion, doctrine, and character formation were addressed.

<sup>26</sup>Bobby Dale Compton, "Baptist Church Manuals," in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists, Supplement A-Z*, ed. Davis Collier Wooley (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971) 3.

<sup>27</sup>See Bobby Dale Compton, "Baptist Church Manuals in America: A Study in Baptist Polity and Practice," (Ph. D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1967) for an introduction to the more important manuals.

<sup>28</sup>Tom J. Nettles, *Teaching Truth, Training Hearts: The Study of Catechisms in Baptist Life* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press Publishing, 1998) 22-26. According to Nettles and other historians, catechisms have been used in Baptist life from their birth as a denomination. See Timothy George and Denise George, eds., *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996) 16.

<sup>29</sup>See Nettles, 21-22 where he quotes an individual recounting her grandmother's catechetical training as a child under the ministry of Richard Furman. She spoke of the benefit of this training, which had prepared her to answer the questions of the church when being considered for baptism.

<sup>30</sup>Charles William Deweese, "The Origin, Development, and Use of Church Covenants in Baptist History," (Ph. D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1973) 32. See also Charles William Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990).

<sup>31</sup>Deweese, "The Origin, Develop-

ment, and Use of Church Covenants," 157-159.

<sup>32</sup>Deweese has argued that early Baptists had four ideals they pursued regarding church membership. He said, "They reached four basic conclusions: (1) admission standards for membership should be high; (2) believer's baptism is essential for membership and helps safeguard the regenerate nature of church life; (3) church members should consistently meet biblical requirements for doctrinal soundness, moral purity, spiritual growth, covenant relationship, and active ministry; (4) discipline should be administered for serious failures to meet the covenantal expectations of church membership." Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, VI.

<sup>33</sup>See William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists 1783-1830, A Collection of Source Material*, with a general introduction by Shirley Jackson Case (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931) 53, 272-416.

<sup>34</sup>J. A. Spurgeon, "Discipline of the Church at the Metropolitan Tabernacle," *The Sword and the Trowel* 5 (1869) 53-54.

<sup>35</sup>Edge, 178.

<sup>36</sup>Some megachurches attempt to follow this model. In SBC life, the most familiar congregation to do so is the Saddleback Valley Community church in California. In the book penned by their pastor, he conveys this aspect of their strategy. This congregation utilizes a "life development process" that attempts to help people reach a certain level of spiritual maturity and then chal-

lenges them to press a bit farther in their relationship with and service to Christ. There is an expectation in the church that members will be active in a small group and that they will work in some area of ministry as they mature. The church utilizes various courses, and challenges believers to make deeper commitments over time through employing covenants. His approach can be summarized in the statement, "If it is the church's objective to develop disciples, then we must think through a process that will accomplish that goal." His book reveals that process and it is in keeping with the second aspect of formative discipline under consideration. See Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 109.

<sup>37</sup>As a matter of observation, I believe that most churches will have to begin by reinstating formative discipline before they can begin again to utilize corrective discipline. Churches may need to start over formally through adopting a new covenant and making membership standards clear. They should be specific regarding the fact that corrective discipline plays a role in the life of their congregation and they should be specific about when and how discipline will be administered. One clear reason for doing so is because of the danger of losing a court battle with a disgruntled member under discipline. While I am not an attorney, it does seem that courts do not punish churches for practicing discipline but rather for

not being consistent in how it is applied. Churches are vulnerable when they start practicing corrective discipline again, if they have not been employing it in a clear and consistent fashion. It is advisable to start over, in a sense, and make membership requirements clear, so that members know which practices warrant discipline. They should also be clear regarding how that discipline would be administered in keeping with the principles of the Bible. For advice on legal issues pertaining to church discipline, see the article by Wayne House in this issue.

<sup>38</sup>This approach is also followed by Saddleback. Warren says, "Saddleback practices church discipline—something rarely heard of today. If you do not fulfill the membership covenant, you are dropped from our membership. We remove hundreds of names from our roll every year." Warren, 54.

<sup>39</sup>As noted earlier, this was the experience in Spurgeon's church. Warren argues that the same is true in his congregation. He said, "I've discovered that challenging people to a serious commitment actually attracts people rather than repels them. The greater the commitment we ask for, the greater the response." Warren, 54. Thom Rainer, in his empirical study of churches with high expectations and requirements found that a church that begins to utilize a required new member's class "does typically see a reduction in new members added the first one or two years. But that decline is usually reversed after two years. The reten-

tion rate, however, is much higher in the church that requires the membership class." Rainer, *High Expectations*, 107. In essence, the thesis of Dean Kelley's well known work is true. It is the strict churches that grow and have the greatest aggregate impact on the world. See Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion with a new Preface for the ROSE edition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press) 1986.

<sup>40</sup>See Robert H. Stein, "Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1998) 14.

<sup>41</sup>Warren, 302-303, and Marv Knox, "Will Altar Calls Go the Way of Funeral-Home Fans?," *The Baptist Standard*, 110, no. 18 (May 6, 1998) 10.

<sup>42</sup>Edge, 160.

<sup>43</sup>Michael Green wrote, "In the early days of the Church, baptism was administered straight away on profession faith and repentance." Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 154. See also Stein, 6-17. Stein argues that it occurred on the same day at the same time (13-14).

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>45</sup>While Stein cites Acts 16:33 and Acts 8:26-40 to make the point that baptism could be administered at night and when no one else was present, and thus is more of a sign of initiation than of public profession, surely the normative pattern developed into one where the community was gathered, if it was indeed a sign

of initiation.

<sup>46</sup>Historian Glenn Hinson wrote, that, "By 100 A. D. pre-baptismal indoctrination was probably almost universal. The erupting of various threats to the faith, such as Gnosticism, only confirmed the need for careful instruction to safeguard the life of the church." Glenn Hinson, "Christian Teaching in the Early Church," *Review and Expositor* 59 (July 1962) 268. Kenneth Scott Latourette agrees, "In the years when Christianity was spreading rapidly and thousands of converts were coming from paganism, baptism was preceded by a period of instruction and probation as a catechumen." Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953) 195.

<sup>47</sup>This is essentially the argument put forth by Edge, 168.

<sup>48</sup>Thus I would not argue for an extensive time of catechetical training for candidates awaiting baptism such as the three-year period followed by Hippolytus. See Hippolytus, *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St Hippolytus of Rome*, ed. Gregory Dix (London: SPCK, 1968) 25.

<sup>49</sup>There is much that needs to be said about the entire evangelistic process in American churches. If we would do a better job of helping persons understand genuine repentance and biblical faith, perhaps none of this discussion would be necessary.

<sup>50</sup>Edge, 31.