

Spirit given to *us* and how best do we release and deploy them? Grandiose plans to be everywhere and do everything can be both as insidious and as appealing as comforting preparations for doing a little more efficiently what we have always done. We need faithfulness. We need openness. Perhaps most of all we need humility.

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Baptists and Discipline in the 17th Century

ALTHOUGH a large proportion of space in Church Books and Church Minute Books is occupied with matters of discipline I have found very little published material dealing with this aspect of early Baptist procedure. I suggest that there are at least two reasons for this. It seems probable, in the first place, that those who have undertaken the writing of the history of their own church have refrained from dealing with instances of discipline in a desire to accord with the principle of not washing their dirty linen in public. As for the writers of more general Baptist history, I would suggest that perhaps constant reference to early Baptist records has made them so familiar with matters of discipline that they have forgotten that this is a characteristic feature of early Baptist life.

Method of entry to a Baptist congregation. Applications for entry to a Baptist congregation were treated with considerable care. It was incumbent upon the applicant to be able to recount his conversion experience, and his subsequent conduct had to be such as befitted a 'professor'. Application for, and acceptance into, membership were matters of weight and seriousness. Doubtless one reason for the safeguards placed around membership applications was protection against taunts from opponents that the Baptists were resurrecting the anarchy of Münster, and encouraging disorder. But of greater importance was the single-minded effort to adhere closely to what were seen as the New Testament standards for the Church. Similar factors would seem to apply to the efforts to maintain purity within the congregation by means of disciplinary sanctions.

The Practice Of Discipline. 'If our snuf(f)s are our superfluities of naughtiness; our snuffers then are those righteous reproofs, rebukes, and admonitions which Christ has ordained to be in his House for good . . . ' so said John Bunyan, referring to the snuffers which accompanied the candlesticks in Solomon's temple.¹

As has been seen, the end of the strict controls on membership was the building up of a pure fellowship of saints. Similarly, discipline was intended to achieve holiness of life and character in the members of the church. Both means and ends were, again, deliberate attempts to regain features of the primitive church. It would be wrong in examining the disciplinary procedures, to adopt any rigid classification, since this would be foreign to the ideas of those operating it. Nevertheless, perhaps a useful distinction can be drawn between preventive discipline and corrective discipline. In the former category fall those practices intended to maintain orthodoxy and uniformity of behaviour within the congregation. Clearly, the adoption of a Covenant, to be signed, or adherence to a set of rules, ensured a considerable uniformity of practice. Similarly, the frequent insistence on regular (often quarterly) visitation by officers of members of the congregation was effective in keeping surveillance over the membership. Probably the frequent meetings of prayer and fasting would also help to cultivate that desire for purity and holiness of life that the leaders were so anxious to achieve.

In addition to preventive discipline, frequent recourse was made to corrective measures. Again, the Baptists were careful to adhere to what they saw as New Testament practice.

Disciplinary Procedure. A clear account of the method of procedure was drawn up at the 1656 meeting of the General Assembly of General Baptists. This sort of approach was, in rough outline, very similar to that adopted by most Baptist congregations in this period.

10. It is agreed that when any sepreate (*sic*) or not sepreate (*sic*) if they be convicted of Sin from the Church and departe from the faith of Christ that they should be (by two fitt messengers appointed & sent from the Church) declared against as incommunicable in things p'taining to the worships of God and also not to be eaten with in common eating and this be and this to be (*sic*) looked upon as the first admonition Matt. 18:12, I Cor. 5:9, 10, 11, Tit. 3:11, 12. II Thess. 3:6, 14, 15. I King. 13:8, 9. Pro. 29:1. Psal. 50:17, 68:21.
11. Moreover that thos thus under admonition should be again after the exerciseing of patience toward them according to the natour of the offence deleared against by Agreement of the Church they Remaing. obstinate and this to be looked upon as the second admonition yet not forbiding persons to admonish as they shall occasionally meete wt. them. Tit. 3:1. II Thess. 3:15.
12. Moreover it is agreed that such after their first & second

admonition should be Rejected. that is to say such as kick against the counsel of God given by the Church going on in the error of their ways should not be looked upon as Brethren nor any ways belonging to the body so as the Church hath any more to do to looke after them, being such as are subverted and sineth being condemed of themselves. Titt. 3:10, 11. I Cor. 6:16, 22. Heb. 10:26, 27, 28, 29. Heb. 6:4, 5, 6, 7, 8. Jude. 12.

13. It is agreed that those three distinct proceedings be declared to the offenders with all solemnity gravely & wisely at times set apart for this purpose after perticuler & plain discovery their errors.
14. It is agreed that in case of necessity as betwixt man & wife members may eat common food with P'sons that are incommunicable in other things. Matt. 12:1 to 8. Joh. 7: 22, 23.²

The principles adopted reveal an anxiety to adhere to a large number of proof-texts, together with a safeguard in Clause 14, to avoid excessive lengths in discipline. Three admonitions are to be given before an offender is to be considered completely excluded. The final exclusion was a matter of some solemnity. Withdrawal from a member implied that he had been judged not to be a recipient of divine grace — that he was no longer to be regarded as a fellow-believer.

Several expressions for different procedures of discipline were current among the Baptist congregations. In the Berkshire Association Records, the Church is required to 'deal with' offenders against the fundamental doctrine of the gospel, and, if the admonitions are not heeded, the Church is to 'reject' the offender.³

A common method of procedure was first to 'warn in' or desire the offender to be at the next church meeting, at which his case was then examined. Often this would also mean that, until the offender was cleared of the charge, or repented he would not be allowed to come to the 'table of the Lord'.⁴ When a member was found guilty of an offence, the usual sanction was to 'exclude him from the table of the Lord; as one not worthy the communion of saints, till they shall be satisfied of his reall & hearty repentance and give satisfaction to the church'.⁵ That this does not imply complete severance from the congregation would seem to be borne out by another entry in the White's Alley Church Book, when a certain Bro. Willborn was told to 'make good his place in heareing the word of god, and not in Cumunion till a further hearing of ye church'.⁶ The expression 'to set at a distance from the Cumunion' is also sometimes employed, with a similar meaning

to 'exclude'.⁷ A more dramatic sanction was occasionally used on more serious offenders. Such persons were to be 'excluded & cast out of the cumunion of the Church'.⁸ Similarly, a notorious offender in the Mill Yard congregation 'haveing noe hope of Riformation' was 'cutt off as a member of Christ's visible Church'. Another member, whose case was regarded as equally hopeless, 'was excluded from church ffellowshipp'.⁹ At Mill Yard, offenders are sometimes spoken of as being 'laid under blame', which would appear to mean that they were excluded from the Lord's Table until they showed signs of repentance.¹⁰ It is not always possible, however, to have confidence that the phrases used have all the precision attached to them that we might desire. Exclusion from communion apparently sometimes means exclusion from the Lord's Supper, and on other occasions complete barring from all fellowship with the church. In any case, it is clear that once a member became estranged from the congregation through some default, he was likely to wander progressively further from that body.

On several occasions, the Mill Yard congregation gave an offender a written statement of the matters they held against him, so that he could consider them.¹¹ At White's Alley, there seems to have been a practice of giving public notice, probably at the Communion Service, of those members 'excluded or taken in againe into Cumunion'.¹²

Reinstatement of the Repentant. As has been emphasised, discipline was intended to purify the church, and help individual believers lead holy lives. While some congregations seem to have been content to let those excluded remain estranged, others made considerable efforts to secure their repentance, so that they could be restored to fellowship with the saints. The Berkshire Asociation recommended that 'Dilligent indeovor be used according to the Scriptures for thaire recovery'.¹³

Christopher Blackwood gives a lengthy account of the procedure for receiving an offender back into fellowship.¹⁴ The Elders are to ask a number of searching questions of the offender, after which the Pastor is to add a grave exhortation. The procedure has probably acquired added weight in process of being written down by Blackwood, but nevertheless seems to have lacked little in solemnity.¹⁵ At the White's Alley Church, those being received back into fellowship were to stand up before the breaking of bread, while the Elder read out their names, and declared the church's satisfaction with them.¹⁶

It appears to have been difficult at the Mill Yard Church to convince the Elders of a genuine repentance. Several instances are recorded where offenders asked to be received back, and acknowledged their sin, but failed to satisfy the requirements

of the congregation. This seems to demonstrate again the rigorous implementation of discipline within this Seventh Day Baptist Congregation'.¹⁷

The Occasions of Discipline. Moral and social failings are probably those which immediately spring to mind on mention of discipline within small groups. Predictably, these make up a considerable proportion of the total number of disciplinary cases found in the Church Records. We find members dealt with for drunkenness and leading 'a disorderly life'; for 'fleshly lusts'¹⁸; for drinking to excess and keeping unseasonable hours¹⁹; for 'gameing and drinking'²⁰; for 'ye sin of drunkenness & of picking up hearlots (*sic*) in the streets'²¹; and for the sin of 'Branday Drinking'.²²

Sexual laxity is frequently penalised—and strangely many of these cases involve women members as the culprits. Whether this is because the women were more frequently guilty of sexual misdemeanors, or because looseness among male members was condoned or more easily overlooked, is impossible to say. It certainly shows that women played a prominent part in the life of the church, and were fully accountable for their behaviour. Offences discovered include fornication,²³ 'and bigamy'.²⁴ One woman was proceeded against for lodging her lover in her husband's house;²⁵ and another for "ffalling upon hime, that now is her husband of beating of hime in his Mrs. home".²⁶ Sexual misdemeanours were not confined to the women. At Porton in 1672, Edward Subdean was excommunicated for attempting to indulge in homosexual practices.²⁷

Obviously the Church found justification for dealing with these matters in Scripture, and the Baptists were ostensibly seeking to adhere to the patterns of conduct they found laid down there. Doubtless they were also concerned to repudiate those members who were visibly bringing discredit upon the congregation. The phrase 'very scandalous to Religion' is frequently employed to describe the offences cited, clearly implying the embarrassment caused in finding 'sin in the camp'. Such evidence was fuel for their critics and persecutors, and seemed to defeat their aim of producing 'visible saints'.

This aspect of bringing a damaging reputation upon the congregation would be particularly pertinent in the action taken over offences in transactions made in society. Men were dealt with for such offences as contracting debts deceitfully,²⁸ financial extortion,²⁹ and failure to act charitably and conscientiously in the office of Constable.³⁰ A long-drawn-out case at Mill Yard involved a member, Thomas Cooper, who had apprenticed himself by covenant, subsequently broke the agreement, and then tried to justify himself by saying that he had sinned in

originally making such a covenant.⁵¹

Another distinct class of offences is that involving matters of Church Order, and contempt of the authority of the Church. Absence from the Church Meetings was noted and brethren would be sent to inquire as to the reason for it.⁵² At Speldhurst, it was agreed that special note should be taken of these absenting themselves from the Lord's Supper, and inquiry into their reasons was undertaken.⁵³ In 1688, the Congregation here had to send a strong letter to Henry Care, their chosen elder, who had long been absent from them, reminding him of the solemn duties of Eldership.⁵⁴

Laxity in spiritual exercise was also liable to penalty. Nathaniel Parkman, of the Killmington Church, Devon, was dealt with for, among other things, 'not seeking god in prayer in the family eithr. in morninge, eveninge or at the tymes of meale'.⁵⁵ This omission led to his excommunication.

The Mill Yard Church, with its Seventh Day principles, took care to defend Sabbath observance. Sabbath-breaking was a serious offence with them, as was going to another congregation to worship.⁵⁶ The separatist churches could not but deal severely with those who joined in services of the Church of England, since this was a negation of all they stood for.

Joane Hunt was dealt with all by the Congregation for that she in her practice did disowne the way of Trueth by ordinary heareing the Ministry of the Nation.⁵⁷

Another woman was similarly rebuked for 'frequenting those places of worshipp where god is not worshipped according to his word'. It is evident that she was afraid to worship with the Mill Yard Congregation while persecution of dissenters continued.⁵⁸

The principle of separatism extended to marriage too, and members were not expected to marry outside Baptists of similar principles. Marriage at an Anglican Church seems to have proved too strong a temptation for some.⁵⁹; while mixed marriages were a frequent cause for exclusion from communion.⁴⁰ For this offence the Church was satisfied with a repentance from the evil, and did not expect the partner to put away his wife.

The traces of witchcraft are occasionally to be found in the seventeenth century records. It was apparently fairly common for 'cunning folk' to be called in to help search for lost articles.⁴¹ The Porton Church proceeded against Joe Crome for 'consulting with a person using unlawful arts for the knowledge of some things that were lost from him'.⁴²

The Baptists of this period tended to emphasise the concept of the authority of the Church. Offenders were excluded,

basically, because they failed to respond to the admonitions of the Church. It was this refusal to "hear the Church"; this slight to the authority of the body of Christ which was theoretically at the base of all their disciplinary activity. Thomas Trip was admonished for the slighting of the Church's counsel after he had failed to respond to a rebuke.⁴³ Another man was to be dealt with for his 'contempt' of the Church;⁴⁴ and another was warned that he was slighting the power of the Church.⁴⁵ On occasions this undoubtedly lofty concept was unmistakably corrupted into a petty annoyance at an individual's stand against the majority.

Discipline over doctrinal error was not invoked as frequently as might be imagined. The Berkshire Association agreed that a member holding an error directly contrary to any fundamental doctrine of the gospel ought to be dealt with.⁴⁶ At Amersham David Jemson was severely criticised for attending a non-Baptist meeting, and inviting those present to pray. He was asked by the church 'how could he macke them his mouth to god that ware in Babelon'. This again would appear to be an instance where a frantic effort was being made to ensure that no contact was had with Christians outside General Baptist circles. Jemson himself eventually admitted he might be wrong 'after several meetings when the matter was discussed'.⁴⁷

At White's Alley two members were cast out after 'departing from the faith',⁴⁸ but it was at Mill Yard, with its strict principles and emphasis on the continuing efficacy of much of the Old Testament economy, that doctrinal questions arose more frequently. There is passing mention, again, of dabbling witchcraft.⁴⁹ But at the same Church Meeting in October 1675, two more significant cases arose.⁵⁰

First was the matter of Brother Coats, who was reported as having denied the godhead of Christ, and that Christ bore any punishment on the cross from god, unless by permission. He also affirmed that the whole of the Judaic law — circumcision and all — was still in force. Then sister Purey was alleged to deny the deity of Christ, and to believe that Jewish Worship at the synagogue was completely 'according to the mind of god'. For her error, and for 'owneing the shadowey law' and attending the Jewish Festivals, she was excluded from the membership of the Church.⁵¹ Joseph Downs also erred in the same direction. At the Church Meeting of December 7th 1675, he was given opportunity to speak, and 'would goe about to prove from 33 Jermy & 45 Ezeikell the continuence of the whole Shaddoy Law'. The congregation decided to admonish him, since his exposition was undermined in their view by the fact that he was 'soe short in praying, and soe disorderly

standing upon the Sabbath'.⁵² In August 1676, he was excluded from the Congregation, since he now asserted that the Jews were the only Church of Christ, and that he went to the Synagogue, since he was 'bound to learn of gods people'.⁵³ In July 1677, Thomas Coats' wife was in trouble for similar views to her husband. She expressed doubts as to whether Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah.⁵⁴

Reasons for Discipline. At this point I would like to make a few observations as to the reasons for the considerable emphasis on discipline among the Baptists in the seventeenth century. First among these would come the desire to return, as far as possible, to what was regarded as the New Testament norm for the Church. Accordingly, the New Testament instructions about the occasion and manner of recalling the erring were closely observed. Moreover, the whole Baptist conception of the gathered church, implied not only a test for entry but also behaviour appropriate to fellowship with the saints within the Church. Those whose works were manifestly corrupt, who were not 'bearing good fruit', were thereby betraying the lack of a true work of grace within. Such people had no place within a gathered church.

In addition to these theological reasons, other factors may be seen as tending to make for a vigorous enforcement of discipline. Since the very concept of a gathered church was still relatively new, it was important to its proponents that it should be put into practice in as pure a way as possible. It was necessary to try to purge the churches of doctrinal and moral error in an attempt to justify the separatist approach. Every effort was made to ensure that the calumnies heaped on the Baptists by their many critics had no basis in fact.

Similarly, at this stage, the churches were comparatively small and few in number, and it was expedient to maintain close adherence to original principles until they had become better established. As has been shown, deviations towards various extremes were frequent, and might have destroyed any unity within the movement had they not been discouraged. The practice of drawing up a Church Covenant which members signed formed part of this attempt to delineate a firm foundation from which defection would not be tolerated.

I would suggest also that the Baptists were in some respects inadequate to cope with the smooth organisation of social groups. They were largely composed of men with little education, who were engaged in such occupations as farm-labouring, serving, retailing, and small manufacturing. They were used to positions of subservience rather than authority, and sometimes appear to have had difficulty in distinguishing between

the letter and the spirit of the law. Frequently the subject of a minor disciplinary procedure appears to have been unnecessarily offended by the men sent to reason with him, so that he was further alienated from the Church rather than restored to fellowship.

It is particularly interesting to contrast the practice of discipline at the Mill Yard Seventh Day Congregation with that elsewhere—for instance at the White's Alley Meeting. At Mill Yard, very trivial matters were often allowed to spin out to inordinate lengths, and to grow to exaggerated size. By contrast, the treatment of offenders at White's Alley was relatively lenient, and there is always a strong attempt to call the offender to repentance, rather than exclude him precipitately. Even in the case of 'departure from the faith' the White's Alley congregation was anxious to give an opportunity for repentance before invoking any sanction. In the case of the Mill Yard Church, I would suggest that the legalistic doctrine and strict discipline have some connection.

NOTES

1. R. Greaves, *John Bunyan*, Abingdon, 1969, p.130.
2. *Church Book of Speldhurst and Penbury*, B.M. Add. Mss. No. 36709, p.30.
3. *Berkshire Association Records*, 1652-1708. Transcript of 1905, The Library, Baptist Church House. p.4.
4. *White's Alley Church Book*, Guildhall Library MS 592/1. p.8.
5. *Ibid*, p.3.
6. *Ibid*, p.16.
7. *Ibid*, p.7.
8. *Ibid*, p.30.
9. *Mill Yard Minutes*, (Photographic copy in Dr. Williams's Library, Gordon Sq.) p.27.
10. *Ibid*, p.25.
11. *Ibid*, p.18, p.24.
12. *White's Alley Church Book*, p.34.
13. *Berkshire Association Records*, 1654, p.8.
14. Christopher Blackwood, 1606-1668, sometime Rector of Staplehurst, Elder of Spilshill General Baptist Church, Kent.
15. E. P. Winter, 'The Lord's Supper, Admission & Exclusion among Baptists of the Seventeenth Century', *Baptist Quarterly* Vol. XVII, No. 7., p.267-281.
16. *White's Alley Church Book*, p.26.
17. *Mill Yard Minutes*, p.18, 19.
18. *Speldhurst and Penbury Church Book*, p.14.
19. *White's Alley Church Book*, p.2.
20. *Ibid*, p.33.
21. *Ibid*, p.12.
22. *Mill Yard Minutes*, p.31.
23. *White's Alley Church Book*, p.3.
24. *Ibid*, p.7.
25. *Ibid*, p.9.
26. *Mill Yard Minutes*, p.26.

27. *Porton and Broughton Church Book*, (Hants) (Photocopy on possession of the Secretary of Broughton Baptist Church.) p.17.
28. *Mill Yard Minutes*, p.24.
29. *Speldhurst and Penbury Church Book*, p.14.
30. *Church Book of Amersham*, Ed. W. T. Whitley, London 1912. p.211.
31. *Mill Yard Minutes*, pp.3, 6, 10.
32. *Amersham Church Book*, p.214.: 'it is the duty of Every member to macke good ther plas with the Church at Amersham.' *Ibid*, p.222.
33. *Speldhurst and Penbury Church Book*, p.32.
34. *Ibid*, p.15.
35. *Churchbook of Kilmington Baptist Church*, 1653-1791. March 1655, p.11.
36. *Mill Yard Minutes*, p.26, p.21. In the second instance, Love Moore had admitted to worshipping at the Mile End Meeting, another Seventh Day Church, but was not convinced of her error by the Elders.
37. *Speldhurst and Penbury Church Book*, p.14.
38. *Mill Yard Minutes*, p.27.
39. *Ibid*, p.19.
40. *Amersham Church Book*, p.219, p.224.
41. Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*. London 1970. *passim*.
42. *Porton and Broughton Church Book*, 7 Feb. 1678. p.44.
43. *Amersham Church Book*, p.216.
44. *White's Alley Church Book*, p.19.
45. *Ibid*, p.26.
46. *Berkshire Association Records*, p.9.
47. *Amersham Church Book*, p.207-8.
48. *White's Alley Church Book*, p.30.
49. *Mill Yard Minutes*, p.24.
50. *Ibid*, p.19.
51. *Mill Yard Minutes*, p.21.
52. *Ibid*, p.20.
53. *Ibid*, p.23.
54. *Ibid*, p.25.

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