

# Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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Just what is a church? Two years ago this month I attempted to approach the question with the operational definition of church as *individuals committed to life together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ*. Since then I have explored this definition as a network of meaning, composed of four interrelated nodes: Christ, Community, Conversion, Commission. This is another installment on **No Conversion—No Church**, with the related subtopics discipleship and discipline.

Last time (041109) I argued that while conversion is essential to the definition of “church,” any particular church will have in its midst both converted and unconverted. For example, Chapter 26, paragraph 3 of the **Second London Confession** (1677) says: “The purist churches under heaven are subject to mixture and error....” Baptists (and churches in general) have varied on how to cope with this. Some ignore it, and slip into undiscerning license. Others obsess on it and fall into puritanical separatism. Most Baptists (not all) have avoided both extremes. Most Baptists do not believe that the story ends when we are converted and that whatever happens (or doesn't happen) next is irrelevant. Likewise, most Baptists do not believe that we cease to sin and become spiritual giants immediately upon conversion.

The avoidance of those extremes is rooted in the belief that we are called to maturity in Jesus Christ, and that maturity takes time, patience and encouragement. That path to maturity for most of us has been one of missteps, false detours, and even steps backwards. Speaking for myself, there are times when I wonder if I am making any progress at all.

Early Baptists used words like “obedience,” “sanctification,” “virtues,” or “piety” to describe the practice of Christian maturity. E.Y. Mullins said “sanctification is the process by which regenerate men [sic] are gradually transformed into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ.” (from Mullins **Baptist Beliefs**, 1912). In the modern era “Christian education” emerged as the umbrella program intended to challenge, urge, and empower disciples along the path of maturity. In recent years we have recovered the ancient idea of “spiritual formation.” Whatever word we use (I happen to prefer “discipleship”); we are talking about a transformation process.

Historically, the church—as a community of faith—was the setting, the tool, and the goal of discipleship strategies. Herein we uncover a tension with some other Baptist distinctives. While we affirm “soul competency,” Baptists also affirm that the church has an essential role in the proclamation of the Gospel (invitation to begin discipleship through conversion), and that the church (as community of faith) plays an equally essential role in the discipleship of believers.

But even more important than these pragmatic, “doing” roles, full participation in the church as a community of faith is the goal of discipleship. If the church is the Body of Christ, and if the church is a key manifestation (even if only a foretaste) of the Kingdom of God, then it is a

theological imperative that Christians become fully mature participants in the community and citizens of the Kingdom of God. We are called to “be” the People of God.

While church membership is no substitute for discipleship, robust discipleship will not develop apart from church involvement. To steal an ancient (and often maligned) proverb: It takes a church to raise a Christian. Discipleship is not so much about information gathering and pulling myself up by my bootstraps as it is submitting myself to the discipline of an “apprenticeship” in order to learn by doing and guidance what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

For Baptists, discipline (a distasteful word today) assumes its proper meaning within the arena of discipleship (it is not irrelevant that we speak of “spiritual disciplines”). The purpose of “discipline” is not to punish (despite the fact that it is a human inclination and within the power of a church to be punitive). Neither is the purpose to excommunicate (because it is not within the power of any particular church to eternally exclude anyone from God) but to bring redemption, reconciliation and return to the path of discipleship. Without discipline, discipleship is impossible. The key issue is how to discipline.

Some would have us believe that, because of the Baptist principle of soul competency, any “discipline” is unthinkable. The historical truth is that Baptists have practiced discipline ever since their formative days (both within a local congregation and between congregations in association). In John Smyth’s **Short Confession** (1610) we read: “The church discipline, or external censures, is also an outward handling among the believers, whereby the impenitent sinner, after Christian admonition and reproof, is severed, by reason of his [sic] sins, from the communion of the saints for his [sic] future good.”

If one reads the historical documents of Baptist churches you will find many examples of the church exercising discipline. But even at its worst, Baptist church discipline is expulsion from the fellowship; corporal or fiscal punishments were not possible. Sometimes the reason for discipline seems trivial. And sometimes the form of discipline seems out of all proportion. The church was not at its best on those occasions, and was exposing its own brokenness. Another (unspoken) Baptist principle comes to mind: None of us is infallible and none of us is immune to discipline by virtue of office.

So ... what is the point? For Baptists, conversion is essential to church. And conversion demands discipleship and even occasional community discipline.



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