

THEOLOGICAL, HISTORICAL, AND PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF
DISCIPLINE AND DISFELLOWSHIPING IN THE CBOQ¹

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Perhaps one of the more well-known recent statements related to the need for discipline in the Christian life comes from the German-Lutheran pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, he wrote:

Cheap Grace is the grace we bestow upon ourselves . . . Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.²

He was not Baptist, of course, but there is much wisdom for Baptists in his well-known statement.

However, the problem with any talk of discipline or discipleship is exacerbated by a number of factors such as the Western *Zeitgeist* of freedom/liberty/tolerance, a fear of the misuse of discipline at the hands of harsh inquisitors, reticence over legal action, or simply the reality of a human nature that wants to be left alone to do what it wants to do. Those factors can beset Christians of all stripes, but one more factor complicates discussions of discipline among Baptists: that of misunderstandings over how congregational government works.

1. Previously called the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec (BCOQ). Rather than go back and forth between BCOQ and CBOQ, I have decided to use CBOQ throughout for all references to the denomination. For histories of the denomination, see Renfree, *Heritage and Horizon*; Heath et al., eds., *Baptists in Canada*.

2. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

In the minds of some Baptists, the notion of local church autonomy (or congregational government) means that no one has the right to say anything about the inner workings or theological convictions of a local church (or pastor or layperson); a local church, so the story goes, is free to pursue God's call without any intervention or say from outside authority, association, or denomination. But is that really the Baptist position? Is it really the case that local church autonomy precludes any form or initiative of discipline from other churches or associations? Does "soul liberty" mean that no one can say anything to another Baptist (or Baptist church) about what they believe? And does that also mean that no church can be disfellowshipped for holding to views that are outside the boundaries of an agreed upon statement of faith and/or covenant?³

The argument being developed here is that discipline is a legitimate practice with a long pedigree among Baptists, something that one nineteenth-century Baptist called a "severe surgery."⁴ Getting the history right is vital on this matter, for, as George Kalantzis states, "good theology does not come from bad history."⁵ While Kalantzis's concern is another matter, his point applies here to my concern—to get Baptist history wrong on this matter will skew the theological outcome.

The following offers a brief identification of some of the issues involved in discipline by providing a summary of three inter-related themes: theological foundations; historical precedents in the CBOQ; practical steps. The theological foundations

3. Note that I use "disfellowship" instead of "excommunicate." Among the larger and longer traditions of the church (e.g., Catholic, and Orthodox), excommunication often implies that the person is lost and is under God's judgment. Of course, disfellowship may mean that, but not necessarily so because, while the differences between parties may be serious theological differences that make partnering in ministry not possible, it does not necessarily mean the one being disfellowshipped has left the faith.

4. "Ottawa Association Circular Letter," 24. The letter reads, "the severe surgery of Scriptural discipline will always be a sad, yet necessary condition to the church's purity and power."

5. Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb*, 2.

are relevant across the Christian spectrum of traditions, while the two subsequent points narrow in on the Baptist experience.

I. *Theological Foundations*

It should be noted right at the onset that virtually every Christian tradition—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—has imbedded within its theology the assumption of the need for discipline as well as has systems in place in its churches to carry it out. And Baptists, as will be seen below, are no different.

An important theological starting point for church discipline is the call to make disciples.⁶ Disciples, by the very definition of the term, place themselves under the tutelage of someone else, such as a master, rabbi, or lord. To “make disciples” (Matt 28) is to bring people into a relationship with Jesus; a relationship characterized by many things (e.g., repentance, faith, grace, mercy, forgiveness, union with Christ, filling of the Spirit, and so on), one of them being submission to the lordship of Jesus. It is a relationship of tutelage under the wing of the Messiah. Christians are to recognize the lordship of Jesus in all aspects of life, in areas of both behavior (sin) and belief (orthodoxy). And when one or both of those is in dissonance with the life of Jesus or the teaching of Scripture, then something must be done.

1. *Personal*⁷

The first stage of discipline is personal. Throughout almost 2,000 years of Christian history, there are myriad traditions and trajectories of ways in which people have embraced a life of spiritual discipline and rigorous asceticism—both in private and public

6. This is a much better starting point than the pragmatics of how to do discipline, for whatever discipline it may be, it must have its genesis in a robust theology of discipline.

7. For various descriptions of Baptist spirituality, see Allen, “Mining Baptist History and Traditions”; Weber, “A Catholic Looks at Baptist Spirituality”; Grenz, “Maintaining the Balanced Life”; Hinson, “Baptist Approaches to Spirituality”; Fiddes, ed., *Under the Rule of Christ*.

life—to further one’s own holiness and devotion.⁸ Through the conviction of the Word, Spirit, sacraments, or fellowship (or some other means of grace), people may become convicted and seek by themselves to return to a life of discipleship—a return to conforming to the way of Jesus. Of course, that process may take time (and may wax and wane over a lifetime), but it is a normal way and rhythm of growing in spiritual maturity and discipleship.

2. *Corporate*

The second stage of discipline is corporate. And it is this stage of discipline that is most misunderstood, contentious, and even feared, partly because of excessive and sometimes abusive communal requirements around practices such as penance, the ban, excommunication, or some other practices associated with discipline.

At the most basic level of corporate discipline, if a person continued to live a life contrary to the way of Jesus and refused to do anything about it—whether through ignorance, neglect, disinterest, or outright rebellion—then other Christians have the onus to come alongside and seek to restore such a person to a right relationship with Jesus. Of course, that process may take time, but it too is a normal way and rhythm of growing in spiritual maturity and discipleship.

The biblical precedent for a life of discipleship can be seen in a number of texts (and, for the purpose of brevity, I am sticking to New Testament texts).

The experience of Jesus and his followers is perhaps the most obvious example. Jesus’ disciples were, at times, rebuked and corrected when their behavior or beliefs were awry.⁹

There are instances of God disciplining those who sinned; the example of Ananias and Sapphira comes to mind as an extreme and unique instance (Acts 5). Paul’s admonition to not take the

8. For a helpful introduction to Christian spirituality, see McGrath, *Christian Spirituality*.

9. For instance, see Mark 16:14; Luke 9:37–56; Matt 8:23–27; 19:14; 20:24–26; Mark 8:33.

Lord's Supper unworthily is another example of God's disciplining of his people (1 Cor 11).

The ministry of Paul and other New Testament writers was filled with exhortations to live an exemplary life marked not only by the being filled with the Holy Spirit (Gal 5), but also by a faithfulness to the apostolic message. And leaders in training, such as Timothy and Titus, were instructed to ensure that the false teaching was addressed and that the truth of the gospel affirmed in the churches (see 1 Tim 1; 2 Tim 2; Titus 1; 2 Pet 2; 1 John 1–2, 4).

The imagery of the church as a family, with mutual responsibilities and concerns, is an analogy that provides a larger context for the "one another" exhortations of the Apostle Paul.¹⁰ Christians are interconnected and must care for one another in a host of ways. And that imagery of a helpful and caring family can be a corrective to any concerns and offense over why others are trying to get involved in one's personal life, or, on the other hand, a reminder that any involvement in other believers' lives should come from a loving concern over a fellow family member.

As for direct passages that speak of discipline and involvement in other people lives, Jesus' instruction in Matt 18 for dealing with conflict is perhaps the most well-known.¹¹ Paul's admonition in 1 Cor 5 is perhaps the second passage that immediately comes to mind. In both cases the interactions were intentional, but not coercive. The interaction was motivated by a desire for the person to return to faithful discipleship, but the engagement was without harsh coercion. In other words, no strong-arm tactics, no appeal to the civil authorities to imprison or burn at the stake, and no fines or beatings. The sole recourse to an unresolved case was disfellowship. The unrepentant person was simply to be considered no longer a member of the fellowship.

The motivation for such engagement is animated by a number of factors such as the preservation of the gospel (something that

10. For a summary of such passages, see Getz, *Building Up One Another*.

11. For a helpful and pastoral commentary on this passage, see Pennington, "Our Conflicted Life Together."

could be lost in transmission if theological error was to become regularized) or Christian witness (if Christian conduct in some way reflected poorly on the faith). Another key motivation was personal and loving concern for restoration. Note that the point in those two classic passages (Matt 18 and 1 Cor 5) was not punitive but restorative. In both cases, the disfellowshipping was hopefully and prayerfully to bring the person back to repentance and a life of discipleship. It was rooted in love, and the desire to see the brother or sister return to the fold.

3. *Summary*

All the above is to say that there is a theological rationale for church discipline. Ideally, personal discipline will be all that is necessary to recover from whatever besets a believer. But if that is not enough, then the community has a biblical mandate and responsibility to help believers get back on track.

But what about all that being lived out among Baptists? What is clear from even a cursory examination is that the earliest Baptists very quickly organized into associations. What followed in subsequent generations was the movement of associations joining together to partner in conventions or denominations. And one aspect of associations was to deal with difficulties, divisions, and discipline.

II. *Historical Precedents in the CBOQ*

Baptists in the early seventeenth century were convinced that each local church could (and should) make its own decisions on leadership, theology, and polity.¹² The context four hundred years ago was primarily a concern with a coercive government and state church seeking submission on all matters of faith. Baptist wrote against such oppression and paid a severe price for their vision of a voluntary church.¹³ Baptists today often refer to

12. *First London Confession*, article 36.

13. Helwys, *Short Declaration*; Smyth, *Propositions and Conclusions*; Busher, *Exhortation*; Busher, *Religions Peace*. Others also called for liberty of conscience. See Underhill, ed., *Tracts*.

this as the “autonomy” of the local church, but early Baptists did not use that term.¹⁴ Baptists have more consistently referred to this principle as the “independence” of the local congregation. That independence, however, was tempered by a need to partnership in associations with other like-minded churches for support and fellowship.¹⁵

It needs to be noted that even with the Baptist emphasis on liberty espoused by the earliest Baptist founders, there was still imbedded in their commentary (and practice) the assumption that, at times, churches may need to be disciplined and even disfellowshipped by their own community (but not by the state). And they saw nothing *unBaptist* about such actions—in fact, they understood it to be a biblical mandate (whereas they saw state and a state-sanctioned church forcing compliance through legislation and violence to be evil and unbiblical). For instance, the confessions of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, as well as the earliest Baptist confessions, all made provision for discipline and disfellowshipping among Baptists.¹⁶ Stated differently, any notion that Smyth and Helwys disavowed church discipline confuses their call for religious liberty with a rejection of church discipline per se, ignores the historical record of their own statements and actions, and discounts the roots of Baptist theology in the Anabaptist tradition of discipline and excommunication.¹⁷ It

14. The term “autonomy” is not indigenous to the Baptists and was originally a term from the field of social psychology used to describe, simply, one’s self-governance. It did not appear in Baptist circles until the influential Southern Baptist scholar Edgar Y. Mullins employed it to describe the independence of the local church around the turn of the twentieth century. See Brackney, *Capsule History*, 57; Canipe, “‘That Most Damnable Heresie’.”

15. *First London Confession*, article 47.

16. Smyth, *Short Confession of Faith*, article 33; Helwys, *Declaration of Faith*, article 17; Smyth, *Propositions and Conclusions*, articles 78–80; *First London Confession*, articles 42–47. For examples of seventeenth-century Baptist discipline, see McBeth, ed., *Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, 57–64.

17. Coker, “‘Cast Out from among the Saints,’” 1–27; Jones, “‘Ecclesiastical Contributions,’” 73–117.

also ignores the fact that Helwys excommunicated Smyth for joining the Mennonites!

The partnership between local churches and the larger body of churches, or associations, had and has its tensions, for various Baptist groups around the globe have understood the power dynamics between associations and local churches in different ways, thus establishing systems and structures with varying nuances, sometimes with more emphasis on the local churches and their liberty and in other cases emphasizing the role of the association. Every Baptist denomination has its own unique culture on this point of how the relationship will work—but what they have in common is the commitment to congregational government.

The partnership within an association has positive benefits, for such relations provided opportunities and organizations for fellowship, education, ordination, training of leaders, sending missionaries, and so on. In fact, in all the discussion of associations and discipline it should be noted that all of these positive activities of mission and ministry took the bulk of the time and resources of associations. Discipline occurred in the life of the churches, but it would be a loss of perspective to see associations as merely, or even mainly, concerned with discipline cases. Yet that relationship between a local church and association has led to current misunderstandings of just how that relationship works in matters of discipline.

Historically, the churches and associations of the CBOQ had their own statements of faith that were the basis of fellowship.¹⁸ As long as everyone agreed on the common statement of faith, all was well. However, what happened when a local church (or pastor) departed from the agreed upon statement?

Local church independence meant that no outside religious body could force a local church to do or believe anything, and that local churches could formulate their own vision, select their own pastors, send their own missionaries, start their own ministries, and spend their own money without needing approval of an outside ecclesiastical body. They were free to serve the way

18. Gillespie, “Ontario’s 19th Century Baptist Tradition.”

they wanted to under the lordship of Christ, the authority of Scripture, and guidance of the Holy Spirit. For Baptists, local church independence meant that a local church could believe and do whatever it wanted without external coercion.¹⁹ But that freedom was in a responsible relationship with an association.

Local church independence never precluded an association or denomination from letting churches go from their ranks that strayed from the convictions of the larger body. As one author notes, this is a point Baptists often get wrong:

It is an enduring and continually repeated flaw in this way of being church that autonomy becomes independency. Each church does what is right in its own eyes. This is sometimes flaunted as the “Baptist way” and defended against those who want to “meddle and interfere” in the life of the local church.²⁰

The basis of joining with an association was to embrace the association’s common set of beliefs, often called a statement of faith and/or covenant. And that relationship meant accountability to a larger collective of churches. In a nutshell, Baptists were free to believe what they wanted and free to leave an association without penalty, coercion, or losing their assets,²¹ but associations were also free to disassociate from local churches if they strayed from the agreed upon tenets of faith. Stated simply, associations could not force a church to change its mind on doctrine or practice, but they could disfellowship churches.

In other words, a local Baptist church could not be forced to believe anything, but it could be disfellowshipped out of an association if its views did not reflect the views it once had upon entering. Of course, the ideal was for the larger body to work graciously, wisely, prayerfully, and patiently with the dissenting local church, hoping to win it back to agreement with the statement of faith. However, when all efforts failed, the association disfel-

19. Historically, the emphasis on local church autonomy was on freedom from state and state church coercion. The autonomy of the local church was never meant to allow a local church to flaunt or disagree with the statement of faith of the association to which it belonged.

20. Wright, *New Baptists*, 54.

21. Unless stipulated otherwise in title deed.

lowshipped the church and let it freely pursue the path it had chosen.

The evidence is simply overwhelming that Baptists in the CBOQ joined into associations, and that those associations reserved the right to disfellowship churches that chose to stray from the agreed upon statement of faith, confession, and/or covenant. The following is a summary of examples from CBOQ history that demonstrate that disfellowshipping local churches is not an unBaptist (or unCBOQ Baptist) practice. Stated differently, discipline and disfellowshipping is a part of the DNA of the CBOQ and has a pedigree that extends well back into the early nineteenth century. Consider the following examples that illustrate this point.

1. *Associations*

Associations not only had clear statements related to local church independence but also had commentary on the role of associations in disfellowshipping any dissenting churches. Here is a brief representative sample of association statements.

Toronto Association (1875):

This Association shall recognize the independence of the churches, and in no case exercise any authority or jurisdiction over them; nevertheless, it shall have power to drop from its connexion any church that, in the opinion of the Association, may have essentially departed from the faith, either in principle or practice.²²

Ottawa Association (1887):

In all the proceedings of the Association, no bond of any kind shall be considered as entered into, or acknowledged, by which any one church is bound to conform to the usages of the rest; but it is a principle distinctly understood and recognized, that every separate church has, and ought to retain, within itself, the power and authority to exercise all church discipline, rule, and government, and to put in execution the laws of Christ, necessary to its own edification, according

22. "Constitution," 20.

to its own views, independently of any other church or churches whatsoever.

Notwithstanding any provision of Article VI, this Association deems it its privilege to judge for itself of the propriety of continuing any church in its fellowship which appears to it to be heterodox in principles, or irregular in practice.²³

Amherstburg Association (1913):

This Association shall not interfere with the independency of the individual churches in conducting their worship and discipline. This belongs to the church itself, and, if an association acts, it should act by way of counsel and advice.

All the churches belonging to this Association shall tolerate what is set forth in the Baptist Church Directory as public offenses . . . [and if they do not, they] shall be subjected to the discipline of the Association, and should they, being called to account for such conduct, refuse to give satisfaction, they shall be excommunicated from the Association.²⁴

Peterborough Association (1888):

This Association shall recognize the power and independence of the churches, and shall, in no case, exercise authority or jurisdiction over them. Nevertheless, it shall have power to drop from its connection any church which, in the opinion of the Association, may have essentially departed from the faith, either in principle or practice, and to exclude from a seat in its meetings any minister or delegate who is manifestly corrupt in either theory or practice; the fact in either case may be ascertained in any way not inconsistent with the gospel.²⁵

Johnstown Association (1828):

This association shall not be disciplinary yet have power of withdrawing from any church proved to be corrupt.²⁶

23. Minutes of the Ottawa Association, 23.

24. Minutes of Amherstburg Association, 1–2.

25. Minutes of the Peterborough Association, 14.

26. Minutes of the Johnstown Association. This item identified in Albaugh, “The Function of the Canadian Baptist Association,” 4.

Haldimand Association (1844):

If any churches composed this Association become corrupt in doctrine or practice, the Association shall endeavor to reclaim them, and in case they do not re-form, they shall be dropped out of their minutes.²⁷

Huron Association (1860):

This Association shall be composed of such churches only, as hold, in substance the following doctrine . . . [This Association] shall have a right to drop any from its fellowship, and church connected with it, which shall neglect to present itself for two successive years, or which, in the opinion of the Association, may have essentially departed from the faith after having been visited by a committee of the Association.²⁸

Owen Sound Association (1907):

[This Association] shall . . . have the right to withdraw the hand of fellowship from any church.²⁹

Niagara Hamilton Association (1997):

The Association may exclude a church from membership, should it appear that the constituent church has become unalterably opposed to the mission purpose of the Association; exclusion shall require a two-thirds majority vote of representatives present and voting at an annual business meeting of the Association, six months' notice having been given in writing to the church through its clerk.³⁰

Elgin Association (2017):

The Association, while recognizing the autonomy of each church, shall have the right, after consulting with the CBOQ Executive Minister, and after 90 days' no-tice, to exclude any church from its mem-

27. Minutes of the Haldimand Association. See Albaugh, "The Function of the Canadian Baptist Association," 4.

28. Minutes of the Huron Association. See Albaugh, "The Function of the Canadian Baptist Association," 4.

29. Minutes of the Owen Sound Association. See Albaugh, "The Function of the Canadian Baptist Association," 4.

30. Niagara Hamilton Association Constitution.

bership, on recommendation of the Executive and by a 2/3 vote at duly constituted meeting.³¹

Middlesex-Lambton-Huron Association (2018):

If it seems advisable to dismiss any Church from the Association, a written recommendation must be presented to the Association Executive. The Executive shall then appoint a Committee to meet with Representatives of such Church in an attempt to resolve those matters which have led to consideration of dismissal. If such attempt fails, the Executive shall notify all Churches of the Association, at least one (1) month before, of the intention to present a written recommendation for dismissal to Council. Such a recommendation shall require a 75 percent (75%) majority for adoption. If Council accepts the recommendation, it shall be presented to Assembly for information.³²

The above statements provide a glimpse of how Baptists sought to balance the independence of the local church with the right and responsibility of the association to deal with dissenting churches.

It seems that, in its earliest years, the CBOQ left discipline and related matters in the hands of the associations. But the tumult of the 1920s led to the CBOQ adding a constitutional amendment that allowed for assembly itself disfellowshipping members.³³ The decision to pursue the matter with Parliament in Ottawa was made in 1926 so that it would be in place for the Assembly in 1927.³⁴ John MacNeill, pastor of Walmer Road Bap-

31. Elgin Association Constitution.

32. Middlesex-Lambton-Huron Association Constitution.

33. Why the Toronto Association did not act first is unclear—perhaps Shields had too much power in the association? Regardless, the Toronto Association did eventually disfellowship him and Jarvis Street Baptist in 1929. Perhaps the initial lack of action by the Toronto Association forced the CBOQ to act on its own. As for the need for an amendment, it seems as though it was not entirely clear in the original Act of Incorporation if churches could be excommunicated. The amendment was to “make the matter clear.” See MacLeod and Graham, “Message,” 1.

34. For details on this and related matters, see Adams, “The War of the Worlds”; Adams, “‘The Great Contention’,” 119–56; Carder, “Controversy.” For a history of Canadian Baptist fundamentalism in

tist, believed that an organization having “the right to govern itself and to possess some power of control over its members” made complete sense and was in no way unBaptist.³⁵ Professor Marshall (the conservative movement’s main person of concern) also saw no problem with disfellowship being an option for disciplining churches, and believed that it in no way undermined the teaching of John Smyth, Thomas Helwys, and Leonard Bushner, all founder figures of the Baptist movement: “*There is not a Baptist in Ontario and Quebec whose religious convictions or theological beliefs or liberty of conscience or right to express his views is in any way whatsoever interfered with by the passing of the Convention bill.*”³⁶ He went on to say (note the concern for lawsuits):

As matters stood before the passing of the bill, it was possible for individuals in the Convention to flout its decisions, to set at defiance its authority, to paralyze its activities, and to work within the Convention against the Convention. The Convention had no redress, for it was possible for the recalcitrants to *challenge the legality* of any disciplinary measures the Convention might decide to take. That impossible state of affairs, which is utterly subversive of the democratic principle for which Baptists stand, is at an end. The Convention can now discipline the disorderly if it cares to do so.³⁷

Even the reaction of those being targeted by the proposed bill was not against the legitimacy of disfellowshipping per se but they felt that the targets of the disciplinary action should be those deemed to be liberal/modernists.³⁸ In all cases, the notion of dis-

general, see Murray and Wilson, eds., *Canadian Baptist Fundamentalism*.

35. “Convention and Parliament.”

36. Marshall, “Separation of Church and State.” Ironically, those of the more “liberal” end of the spectrum were the drivers behind the disfellowshipping of the fundamentalists in the 1920s, but today some on the more “liberal” end of the spectrum claim that disfellowship is unBaptist. Emphasis in the original.

37. Marshall, “Separation of Church and State.” Emphasis in the original.

38. Adams, “The War of the Worlds,” 487.

fellowshipping was agreed upon—the actual issue at stake was who, why, and when.

2. *Handbooks*

The CBOQ produced a number of handbooks for associations that provided information and direction in a number of areas of church and association life. One section of the handbooks dealt with suggestions for constitutions and structures. The three examined for this research all provided similar wording for constitutions.

Association Handbook (1952):

ARTICLE 8. This Association has not sought and shall not seek to exercise any authority over its member churches. It shall, however, have the right to exclude from its membership any church, which after careful inquiry, is deemed to have departed from the faith or to have become non-co-operative.

Association Handbook (1971):

ARTICLE III.4. While the Association recognizes that it is the privilege of every church to rule its own affairs without any outside interference whatsoever, the Association maintains its right to dismiss a church from the fellowship when it deems this to be wise and necessary. Dismissal of a church from membership, except at its own request, shall require a recommendation from the Association Council and a two-thirds vote of delegates at an Annual Assembly.³⁹

Association Handbook (1976):

ARTICLE III. The Association, while recognizing the autonomy of each church, shall have the right, after ninety days' notice, to exclude any church from its membership, on recommendation of the Association Council and by a two-thirds vote of the Association in Assembly.

39. Interestingly, in 1927, a three-fifths majority was required to disfellowship T. T. Shields and Jarvis Street Baptist Church. See Carder, "Controversy," 82.

3. *Incorporation Bylaws (2014)*

While the implications of the impact of incorporation on distinctives related to Baptist governance are still not fully known, what is clear is that the bylaws of incorporation have imbedded within them the recognition that churches can be disfellowshipped for straying from the agreed-upon statement of faith and/or covenant, and/or constitution. The following excerpts from the CBOQ By-Laws (2014) illustrate this claim (parts underlined by me for emphasis).

2.04 Qualification Requirements for Membership

(a) A prospective Local Church or Association may qualify as a Member of the CBOQ if, in the opinion of the Board of Directors, such prospective Local Church or Association meets and maintains all of the following qualifications:

(i) it has submitted an application for Membership in the CBOQ which indicates that:

(1) it is in substantive agreement and will continue in agreement with the Constitution of the CBOQ; and

(2) its constating documents are not contradictory to the Constitution of the CBOQ;

(iii) it has entered into, and will at all times be in agreement with, the Covenant.

2.11 Resignation and Termination of Membership

(b) Termination of Membership

Membership in the CBOQ shall automatically terminate upon occurrence of any of the following:

(i) if the Covenant between the CBOQ and the Member, if applicable, is terminated for any reason;

(ii) if at a Meeting of Members of the CBOQ called for that purpose, and upon recommendation by the Board, the Members, through Delegates, determine by Ordinary Resolution that a Member is to be removed as a Member of the CBOQ with cause for failure to maintain all of the qualifications to be a Member set out in Section 2.04, pro-

vided that such Member is first offered an opportunity to be heard;

6.03 Qualifications of Partners in Mission

Partners in Mission Must Be in Agreement with Constitution of the CBOQ. A prospective Partner in Mission may qualify for admission as a Partner in Mission of the CBOQ if such prospective Partner in Mission meets and maintains all of the following qualifications:

- (a) the prospective Partner in Mission indicates in writing that it is in full agreement and will continue in full agreement with the Constitution of the CBOQ, as amended from time to time; and
- (b) the constitution, statement of faith and by-laws of the Partner in Mission are not in conflict with the Constitution of the CBOQ.

6.06 Removal of Partners in Mission

A Partner in Mission may be removed by the Members by a Special Resolution at a Membership Meeting duly called for that purpose, providing that the Partner in Mission is first given an opportunity to be heard.

4. *Summary*

It is one thing to point to constitutions and bylaws for the right in principle to disfellowship. But did Baptists ever follow through and actually disfellowship churches? Both individuals and churches have been defrocked, lost their accreditation, or had their good standing in the Baptist community rescinded. In the nineteenth century, associations identified by name itinerant ministers who the churches should avoid as “imposters.”⁴⁰ The example of T. T. Shields is perhaps the most (in)famous example of a pastor being expelled from the convention and association. The disfellowshipping of Shields and Jarvis Street Baptist (and a number that followed in the wake of the discord in the 1920s) is

40. Albaugh, “The Function of the Canadian Baptist Association,” 9. For examples, see “The Function of the Canadian Baptist Association,” 10, or Minutes of the Niagara Association, 8–11.

by far the most significant example of how pastors and people have been removed from Baptist fellowship.

In sum, associations not only had such statements, but they also did sometimes act on them when the situation warranted it. The associations may not have always acted on in a charitable, wise, or redemptive fashion, but the evidence clearly indicates that there is nothing necessarily unBaptist about associations or convention disfellowshipping churches.

III. *Practical Steps*

In the midst of the 1927 unrest and division in the CBOQ, the *Canadian Baptist* printed a brief article providing a theological rationale for church discipline. It began with a reminder that “discipline” includes stages of godly interactions and interventions long before any formal disfellowshipping occurs:

The content of the term “discipline,” as used in this connection, should not at all be confined to the act of the withdrawal of the hand of fellowship by the church from an offending member. This is the final step that makes any further effort for restoration difficult if not doubtful. This final step should be preceded by brotherly watch care, instruction, correction and admonition. If the Christian church would only faithfully pursue this policy in the spirit of Christ, the withdrawal of the hand of fellowship from any member would rarely, if ever, be a necessity.⁴¹

Yet, it went on to admit that there was a time when discipline may be necessary:

There may be certain irregularities and lack of conformity that do not subvert in the Gospel, nor obstruct the progress of the Kingdom of God, for which it is not well to trouble the church. There is a large class of defects and irregularities which, while they should not be overlooked, but should be patiently borne with, yet every good influence should be brought to bear on their correction and elimination. There are, however, some things if continued or persisted in that

41. Gordon, “Church Discipline,” 6.

make it imperative for a New Testament church to withdraw the hand of fellowship from the offender.⁴²

But how is that discipline to be carried out? What guides the churches to know what items to address and what to leave alone, and what is a way of wisdom when the decision is to proceed with a process of discipline?

The ways in which the denomination works with dissenting people, churches, associations, and partners in ministry is critical, for both truth and grace—and a huge dose of wisdom—are critical when dealing with such delicate but important matters. However, answering the “how to” part of dealing with divisive and distressing issues among people and churches is vexing. There is no “magic bullet” that will miraculously bring about the desired outcome, and rarely does the process end with a group of happy people. That said, the following are some best practices for matters of church discipline.

1. *Conduct a Self-Analysis*

One must be very careful to make sure that what is being done, when looking at someone’s perceived lapse in discipleship, is not rooted in one’s own animosity, pride, power, bias, ambition, or cultural baggage. Such motives are poison to relationships and any helpful process of engagement.

One must also be very careful of being heavy-handed, legalistic, or even pre-emptive (perhaps God is already at work and you will sabotage what is already begun). The church is a place for disciples, but not perfect ones. There must be room for growth without the micromanagement (and life-killing) behavior of over-zealous pastors, prophets, or Pharisees.

2. *Seek Clarity*

Hearsay versus Reality. Perhaps the best first course of action is actually to find out if what is being said about a person or a church is actually the truth. Gossip and innuendo have always been a problem, but, in the age of the Internet and social media,

42. Ibid.

it is easy to get a skewed view of things. Take the time to get it right, for the sake of both truth and love.

Theology versus Polity. The distinction between theology and polity is an important one. Theology is what one believes, and polity is how that belief is put into practice in the church. For instance, while two Baptists may hold to believer's baptism (theology), one may support the baptism of a child who professes faith at any age (polity) whereas the other may hold off and only baptize a child who has reached the age of twelve (polity). The point being made here is simply that sometimes people are debating polity when they actually agree on theology. Of course, differing polity may also be due to differing theology. Either way, be clear about what is going on.

Popular versus Official Religion. In every Christian tradition, there are views in the pews that reflect a popular form of faith that does not necessarily correspond with the "official" position as stated in creeds or statements of faith. This dynamic can be troublesome for Baptists when it comes to any discipline process, for the view from the pew (and from some pulpits) is that being Baptist means that you can think and do what they like without answering to anyone. My hunch is that many Baptists are unaware of the official statements noted above related to associations disfellowshipping churches.

Conscience versus Essentials. One must be very careful to differentiate between differences in issues of conscience and differences in issues of core behavior and belief. The Apostle Paul makes it clear that some things are a matter of Christian conscience and, as a result, there will be differences among Christians on some disputes. In such cases, a spirit of love and humility must mark our relationships.

Systems and Process. A lack of clarity in regard to systems and process is crippling to any hope for a healthy working through of difficulties in the church.

Associations in the nineteenth century were central to most Baptist churches' life. As briefly noted above, associations had a multitude of positive functions in the life of the local churches, and pastors and churches often leaned heavily upon the work of the association for community, instruction, guidance, and so on. In regard to discipline, what many associations had was a ready-made judicial system in place as well as a legislative system for when churches needed some sort of larger body to aid in seeking to work out inter-church problems in a way that was most helpful and redemptive.⁴³ Sadly, the formation of the convention in 1888 contributed to associations losing some of their sense of purpose, and incorporation in 2014 furthered that sense of a lack of purpose.⁴⁴ Certainly, for most associations today, there are no permanent systems in place for when discipline matters arise. And that lack of systems leads to a damaging lack of clarity.

Related to systems is the need for a clear process for working through difficulties. That process is not well developed in the CBOQ at the moment, but it is currently working to rectify this problem. Compounding the problem in the CBOQ is the uncertainty of the relationship of associations to discipline. Are there two "tracks" to discipline (i.e., CBOQ/assembly and associations) or just one? Either way, that relationship needs to be clarified.

Must versus Suggests. Clarity of standards is also essential, and, by standards, I mean knowing the difference between what *must* be believed in order to stay in fellowship with others and what is *suggested* be believed. As the brief commentary below indicates, this area is a bit muddy for the CBOQ and much work is necessary to clarify the musts and the suggests.

43. Albaugh, "The Function of the Canadian Baptist Association."

44. It is noteworthy that there have been calls for a rejuvenation and reimagining the role of associations due to sense that the CBOQ was taking over areas of ministry traditionally in the hands of the association. See Price, "Association"; Albaugh, "The Function of the Canadian Baptist Association"; "The Organizing and Recognizing of New Churches."

As the following sections of the CBOQ By-Laws (2014) indicate,⁴⁵ the “Constitution” is the key document that encapsulates CBOQ convictions. But what exactly is the CBOQ Constitution? The By-Laws define it as:

Articles (including the Purposes and Core Values), the General Operating By-law, By-laws, any Policies and Procedures, any Rules and Guidelines, any Standards and the Rules of Order adopted by the CBOQ from time to time.

Consequently, in order to understand the Constitution, one must understand the various documents that make up the Constitution. Those documents can be found here:

- “Consolidated General Operating By-Law No. 3”⁴⁶
- “Core Values”⁴⁷
- “Statement of Ethical Pastoral Conduct”⁴⁸
- “Resolution on Same-Sex Marriage”⁴⁹
- “Discipline & Restoration Protocols”⁵⁰
- “Covenant Agreement”⁵¹

The relationship of “This We Believe”⁵² with the Constitution is ambiguous. On the one hand, it describes itself as a resource document and not a must statement of CBOQ beliefs. The By-Law document also does not make mention of it as an element of the Constitution. On the other hand, the “Statement of Ethical Pastoral Conduct” seems to place it within the items included within the Constitution—and thus a matter for disciplinary action if one does not adhere to its contents. And many churches see the document as a must document, not a should document, and are quite surprised when they find out that is not the case.

45. “Consolidated General Operating By-Law.”

46. Ibid.

47. “Core Values.”

48. “Statement of Ethical Pastoral Conduct.”

49. “Resolution on Same-Sex Marriage.”

50. “Discipline & Restoration Protocols.”

51. “Covenant Agreement.”

52. “This We Believe.”

The Constitution is thus a compendium of statements and decisions that are required belief for a local church or association's membership to be in good standing with the CBOQ. They are also required for CBOQ accredited ministers. Any departure from the Constitution can be cause for church discipline as outlined in the By-Law (as noted above). But there is need for clarity, at least a "one stop shopping list" where are the diverse documents can be found and the musts made unambiguously clear.

3. Commit to Safety

There must be a commitment to fair treatment and the preservation of human dignity. Being right does not mean that you can treat your opponents poorly. Being wrong should not make one a target of abuse. Whatever the outcome, whatever the issue, people must be treated with dignity—especially since being disfellowshipped could be a humiliating and/or traumatizing experience. Everything must be done, from start to finish, to create a safe process, and that includes things such as clear procedures, confidential communication, transparent deliberations, and kindness despite differences.

4. Commit to Act

All the above problems associated with discipline can naturally be seen to be a reason to put off dealing with troubling scenarios. However, most problems related to churches, associations, and discipline rarely take care of themselves. In fact, in most cases acting sooner rather than later seems to be a better course of action.

5. Let the Church Decide, Not the Courts

As the author to the above noted article on discipline argues, the final decision should be in the hands of the church, not the state:

If I understand this aright, once a movement for reconciliation is begun, neither party, while unreconciled, has the option to 'drop' the matter *until the church, which is the final court of appeal*, disposes of

it according to the teaching of Jesus as outlined in the passage referred to [Matthew 18].⁵³

It is a grave mistake to let the state make inroads into the church's internal affairs by invoking the power of the courts—that is a power once gained that will not freely be relinquished in subsequent years. It also makes for an abysmal testimony.

IV. *Conclusion*

Associations were not conceived to be powerful organizations that could dictate to the churches what they should believe or do. And the relationship between the churches and association was to be one marked by mutual help, grace, service, and a host of other positive dynamics revealing how brothers and sisters in Christ, located in local churches, could partner together to carry out the work of the church. The only real “power” of associations in regard to discipline was to remove churches (or people) from fellowship. The “severe surgery” mentioned at the opening of this research was not physical or psychological violence, but removal from fellowship. It was severe in that it could break bonds of Christian fellowship, but that is as far as it could go—there was no financial penalty, no calling on the state to punish, no incarceration, no tar and feathering, and (ideally) no vitriol. The goal of “surgery” was to save life, and Baptists—including CBOQ Baptists—have a long pedigree believing that sometimes disfellowshipping will do just that. It may not be liked, it may not be done well, it may unintentionally hurt people, it may end up being divisive, it may go against the grain of culture, and it may provoke lawsuits, but it is not unbiblical per se, and certainly not unBaptist.

53. Gordon, “Church Discipline,” 6. Emphasis added.

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