SOCIAL LIFE AND CHURCH DISCIPLINE AMONG BAPTIST CHURCHES ON THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA FRONTIER[1]

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THE first step toward organized society on the frontier was the organization of churches. Their establishment brought an increase of orderliness and decency. Since the ownership of the trans-Allegheny territory was a matter of dispute between Virginia and Pennsylvania, and the seats of government of both states were east of the mountains, authorities of the law had no part, in the early days of settlement, in the establishment of an orderly society. Doddridge states that the settlers were at liberty to do whatever was right in their own eyes. The most effective recourse was to "the imperial court of public opinion." Although there were no courts, lawyers, magistrates, sheriffs, or constables, no civil, military, or ecclesiastical laws, the turpitude of vice and the majesty of moral virtue were apparent among the settlers.[2] The punishments that were administered were as effective as the jail and the court sentence would have been.

Since the civil authority was nonexistent, the authority of the churches was a great force for social betterment. Responsibility for uprightness and justice naturally rested upon the churches, for they were the only agencies prepared to assume it. Many of the early settlers of western Pennsylvania had left their homes in the east to be free of the regulations and

[1] Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on May 27, 1941. Dr. Davidson is minister of the First Baptist Church of Warren, Pennsylvania, and this article presents some of the results of his studies as a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh.—*Ed.*

[2] Joseph Doddridge, *Notes on the Settlement and Indian Wars of the Western Parts of Virginia and Pennsylvania from* 1763 *to* 1783 . . . p. 168 (Wellsburg, Va., Gazette, 1824). With this and other exceptions noted below, the entire account is based upon the minutes of Great Bethel, Salem, Goshen, Mt. Moriah, George's Creek, and Simpson's Creek Baptist churches—all in the Redstone country of southwestern Pennsylvania.

restraints there. Many were glad that the arm of the law did not reach over the mountains, and would have been content not to have churches in the community to hamper their new-found freedom. Most of the settlers, however, had been reluctant to leave their old churches and were eager to start new ones as soon as possible. Progressive settlers, interested in growing communities, new industries, and profitable farming, realized that churches were forceful influences for progress, and even the governments realized that the growth of churches preceded the establishment of better order, making the necessity of civil intervention less. Furthermore, the churches were the most definitely organized social institutions on the frontier, and membership was considered to be a necessity for good standing in the community by the majority of the settlers. This unique position made it possible for the churches to wield great power for morality, justice, and godliness.

The church could not jail its members nor deprive them of their civil rights, although Great Bethel church in Uniontown imposed a fine upon members who neglected to give labor in the construction of a new meeting house in 1784. It was able, however, effectively to enforce its control by appealing to the natural desire for the goodwill of the community, and by depriving recalcitrant members of the privileges of the church. The Baptist churches, as independent bodies, were free to adopt whatever rules and regulations the members thought feasible. The Covenant, constitution, by-laws, and special resolutions made each member responsible for every other in maintaining a high standard of practical godliness, and in encouraging each other in good works. Such agreements usually were adopted at the first meeting of the church and were the authority for all matters of discipline thereafter. Only members of the particular body were disciplined, although committees were sent from one church to another regarding the discipline of members of the sister church.

Some of the offenses, such as neglecting church worship and communion, or advancing spurious interpretations of controversial Scriptures were only technical sins, while others, such as personal enmities existing between communicants, the over-use of liquor, dishonesty, and social sins were matters of great moral concern, which might otherwise have been handled by the civil authorities.

Although the minutes of the business sessions of the churches are filled with the important and the trivial, one who reads them readily becomes aware of the powerful influence of the pioneer Baptist church upon the lives of its constituency. Such disciplinary activities become more significant when it is remembered that each Baptist church was an entirely self-governing unit, a small democracy, and the members were using the highest type of social legislation.

Certain rules concerning trials were adopted, in addition to those contained in the by-laws, as they appeared to be necessary. The Salem church decided in 1830 that a member should not remain in the meeting while his own case was being discussed, and at Goshen it had long been the rule that a woman should be allowed to witness in favor of her husband. In more serious cases, evidence was written and "duly sworn." At Salem, in 1833, it was found advisable in certain serious cases to call in the local squire. In 1815 the Goshen church had voted to appoint a permanent committee of five to seven members, including the minister, to which the general government of the church was committed, subject to the final decision, in unusual cases, of the whole church. Settlement of certain cases could not be effected even with the help of personal friends. These were brought before the church body, tried, and a decision given. If the offender were not present, he might be suspended until he attended to make his defense. Often a committee was appointed consisting of the minister, a deacon, and trustworthy men and women, to "labor with" the suspended person, or to "cite him to the next meeting." Members were in duty bound to report any sin or disobedience of fellow members to the church body. Such a report called for the immediate appearance before the session of the accused person, who made his explanation or defense. A member of Goshen church appeared in a business meeting, accused *himself* of misconduct, and asked to be suspended from the privileges of the church until he could make amends. This is the exception, however. Guilty persons were at first reprimanded, or warned before the public gathering and put under the special "watch-care" of the congregation. Continuation in the sin was punished by suspension and excommunication, both of which acts were executed in the open meeting. Often a special day would be set aside when a condemned member would be "read out" of the fellowship. Confession of guilt, an attitude

of penitence, and a promise to abandon the sin was always rewarded with complete forgiveness and restoration to the church fellowship.

Trials sometimes lasted for many months, depending upon the willingness of both parties to co-operate, and the satisfaction of the contending parties with the final decision. A record of the business proceedings was carefully transcribed by the clerk in the church record book. When a record was re-written at Great Bethel, it was voted that "the old church book shall be transcribed verbatim without omissions." Evidently there was a temptation to omit the more embarrassing entries of past trials.

Matters of discipline group themselves into three general classes: matters that concerned two or more members of the congregation, such as contentions, disagreements, and enmities; sins of the individual, by which he made himself unworthy of the privileges of the church, such as intoxication, gross immoralities, and breaches of the common law of honesty and uprightness; and technical sins, such as infraction of the Covenant or rules of faith, disregard of the authority of the church, neglect of church meetings, and holding spurious theological beliefs.

The church was called upon to arbitrate in matters of contention among its members relating to the ownership and exchange of property. A member of Great Bethel was accused of "fraudulent dealing and of breach of the Sabbath," and one at Mt. Moriah of "taking hogs that was none of his property." William Birt of Goshen church was accused of "defrauding John Chaffinch in swap of horses." Accusation was made against a Great Bethel member for "Cheating in a Cow that he had bought of him." A certain John Smith at Mt. Moriah was disciplined for selling his horse at private sale when he had advertised to sell the animal "at public sale, to the damage of Ebenezer Williams." To settle a difference between Brother Goldin and Brother Hall concerning the exchange of some grain, the same church concluded that one brother should pay the other two bushels of wheat. The penalized man was satisfied, but the other brother still charged his adversary with being "a grand liar and a dishonest man." Often trading was done in produce and the church frequently was called upon to balance the values. Thomas Lewis borrowed "the value of $100. in money" and gave bond and security for the payment of the price of "four Tunn of iron within one year after." The Mt. Moriah church's decision was that the deal was "extor-

tion and oppression," and the lender was suspended "until his future conduct shall prove that he has sincerely repented of the crime." A certain Moses Sutton of Great Bethel, son of the pastor, sold a mill to Job Little, but before yielding possession decided not to sell. The church resolved that "Moses Sutton should be Publickly sensured" for his dishonesty, and demanded that the mill be given up.

Certain humorous instances arose, which were certainly not so amusing at the time. A certain Brother Morris of the Big Whiteley settlement had bought some "Superfine flower" that he found upon examination to be "common flower," because he detected some small specks in it. A reporting member stated that "he did not think it was fair for a man that used Specticles to inspect flower for it made the Specks appere larger." John Deweese of Mt. Moriah created a bad reputation for himself by "talking about killing deer out of season and he said he would be damned if he did not kill one if he had an opportunty." To add to his ill-fame, a sister had understood that he "told a company of Westerners who were riding the road that they were damned rascals and cursed scoundrels," and had been several times "much in liquor and cursed and swore." We are not surprised that the church expelled him.

Personal enmities, no matter what the cause, were not allowed to exist between members of the congregation. The Covenant always demanded that a serious attempt be made to settle all personal grievances outside the public meeting, using scriptural admonition found in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew as the standard. One member of Goshen church was disciplined because she condemned another member before the church before taking the "gospel steps" to settle the difference. Many such differences arose because of rumors, gossip, and slander, which were passed along the "grapevine route" by careless members, mostly women. One Uniontown member was forgiven for having spoken inadvisedly about a fellow member while attending a spinning match. Sister Ashcraft of Mt. Moriah was called to examination for her conduct in a quarrel with John White three months before. A member of the same church, who had "talked scandalously about her neighbor's Children," was not only "publickly sensered," but the date was set for excommunication and a committee was named to cite her to the meeting. Baily Johnson, a brother of the Goshen church was censured for

"Spreading Scandalous Lieing Reports against Sister Hail in order to defame her Character." A Salem sister accused another for "Reproaching hir Character and for Communing with hir when Dissatisfied with hir and neglecting to take the Proper Steps of Discipline." Both women were pronounced guilty for their neglect, and censured.

Contentions sometimes reached across the boundaries of the church into another congregation, whereupon both churches entered into the matter through a special committee. A sister of the Mt. Moriah church had repeated some disreputable facts about a member of the George's Creek congregation. A committee from the latter church called upon the minister and committee of the Mt. Moriah church to ask that the offending sister be disciplined. Upon investigation, it was found that the sister had "dropt expressions which in themselves were imprudent and untender," but that she was not "chargable with telling any wilful lie." Since no church could discipline a member of another body, the matter was closed.

Disagreements sometimes led to fighting, especially when the parties were intoxicated. A member of Mt. Moriah church was suspended for assaulting another and "kicking him and expressing his sorrow for not beating him more." Other members were suspended for fighting, frequenting bad company, drinking at public places, and, at Salem, "manifesting blood thirsty Disposition." Still another at Mt. Moriah was brought up for "assaulting of an choking of Even Davis." A serious trial arose at Goshen when a member accused another of saying "he would beat him if he caught him in some Narrow Lain." At Uniontown a member got drunk, got into a fight, and "spoke unadvisedly to the disonner of the Cause of his Lord and Wounding of his Brethren and Sister." Fighting often destroyed property as well as character, as in the case of Brother Charles McDonald of Great Bethel who drank to excess, and "behave in a Riotous manner in striking himself and Breaking glass in a window or rather paper paster on a sash." A wiser procedure was taken by one brother who came to Goshen church, confessed that he "acted unbecoming in fighting with a man," and was restored to fellowship.

The church often was called upon to settle knotty family problems. The Mt. Moriah church disciplined a man for "leaving his wife and not taking proper care of her." Philip Rogers was suspended for "beating his

wife and for swearing his wife and also for talking of marrying another wife." Neglect of family usually was accompanied by other faults. A man was brought up for telling falsehoods, degrading his neighbors, and neglecting his family, and another, Joshua Hawkins, for "refusing to hear the church and for the abuse of his Wife and other crimes." Joseph Jones left his family upon some business without giving any information to his family, and was disciplined for it. A wife and husband who could not settle their many differences came before a church for assistance. The church soon found that both were guilty; the wife had called him such unbecoming names as "Whelp" and "puppy"; the husband had revealed to her that he often regretted the day he married her. Both husband and wife were excommunicated. Elizabeth Hall, an unruly daughter, was excluded for "abuseful language to her Father and unbecoming conduct in general."

On the frontier where food was scarce, waste was a serious offense, not only to one's family, but also to the church and neighborhood. Frugality and economy, in this bare and treacherous wilderness, were moral issues, the neglect of which was a concern of the church. A careless man was brought before the church for leaving beef out until it was spoiled by neglect. A Simpson's Creek member was suspended for leaving the carcass of a deer in the forest to spoil.

The second class of offenses dealt with by church discipline arose out of the members' neglect of the common standards of moral decency, and their participation in certain social activities of the community which the church considered objectionable.

The problem of the misuse of liquor, one of the most difficult problems of frontier life, was not confined to western Pennsylvania. The Philadelphia Baptist Association in 1788 took a characteristic Baptist position regarding the use of liquor when it resolved that "this Association taking into consideration the ruinous effects of the great abuse of distilled liquors throughout this country take this opportunity of expressing our concern with our brethren of several other religious denominations in discountenancing them in the future, and earnestly entreat our brethren and friends to use all their influence, to that end, both in their own families and neighborhood, except when used as a medicine."[3]

[3] Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, 1788.

Intoxication was, by far, the most common offense for which members were brought before the church for correction. Just as gossip and "scandalous talking" were characteristic of the female members, so drinking to intoxication was a common failing of the men. As a rule, the offenders were not habitual drunkards, but were "overtaken in liquor" on special occasions, for which they were truly penitent. Drinking to intoxication often was mentioned with other related offenses. A member was brought before the Great Bethel church for "geting drunk and attempting shooting and offering weager." Many were disciplined for being "overtaken in liquor and unbecoming language," "getting in liquor and attempting to fight," and "drinking to excess and telling falsehoods." One member was excommunicated for "the crime of drunkenness and rejection of the calls of the church." Another was charged with "being drunk and Swearing at his own vandue [public sale]." A member was accused of getting drunk "and offering to Shute" a brother. A Simpson Creek member was accused of drinking overmuch "and vain singing and threw the mug over his head liquor and all." Two members were suspended for getting drunk "and bringing a reproach upon religion and disgrace upon themselves."

Drinking under certain conditions seemed not to be so serious as at others. William Crawford acknowledged that "at the Election he was overtaken with liquor and became intoxicated." A month later he was received again into full fellowship, "he being as we, humble, in possession of Godly sorrow and repentance for his faults." Andrew Davisson got drunk at court and was forgiven. A brother Ichabod Ashcraft drank to excess "at a burying." He was not condemned nor suspended but was left "to see if his future conduct will be better."

A few instances of women having been overtaken by liquor are found. The repetition of the same names indicates that only a few women drank, and these became recurring problems in the church. In the Mt. Moriah church in 1787, a charge was brought against sister Lettis Wood "about her being intoxicated with liquor." She appeared and declared "that as she was unwell and from losing her natural rest she was somewhat in liquor above what was right." The church did not discuss how much drinking "what was right" permitted, but forgave her. Ten years later Lettis was brought up again for "getting drunk at James Heweys."

She denied the charge, then confessed that she had been drunk, asking for forgiveness and restoration, which the church gave. Four years later she was again brought up for the same offense. The church excluded her from the fellowship "for drinking frequently to excess." The only other case of a sister drinking to excess was that of Mary Brown of the Great Bethel church. Finding her guilty and incorrigible, the church excluded her.

Frontier Baptists were severe disciplinarians, and often narrow in their attitude toward social pleasures. They denied themselves simple amusements which might have lightened the burden of loneliness and fear in their hard and demanding pioneer life. "Dancing and frolickin" as well as "fiddlin" were common sins, and were naturally mentioned together. No member was allowed to tolerate them in his home, under penalty of discipline. A Mt. Moriah member appeared before the church and condemned *himself* "for suffering fiddling and dancing in his home," although the wrong was against his will. The "prudent means" that he used to hinder it were not sufficient. Thomas Read and his wife were brought up, not only for tolerating dancing in their house, but also for taking an active part therein. Upon confession, they were suspended. Almost a year afterward, Brother Read was suspended for "Dancin and Drunkinness," and his wife, Betsy, was restored. The marriage of the daughter of a member was an occasion of unusual festivity, and some disorderly conduct on the part of a certain young lady, Cester Persons. Her mother was brought up before the congregation for not taking "such measure as in our Opinion as She absolutely ought to have done either to prevent or Supress that disorder and immorrel Conduct of Cester Persons. . . ." A Great Bethel member was accused of encouraging dancing, but upon his explanation, he was acquitted of the charge.

Not only was dancing and frolicking forbidden in the homes of members, but the young people were forbidden to take part in such affairs either as fiddlers or dancers. One young man appeared at church and acknowledged that he had played a fiddle twice, and was suspended from communion. Cathren West, a spirited young lady of the Mt. Moriah church, "being at a place of Frolliken joined in danceing with the rest of the company," was disciplined for it. Peter Smith was suspended for "going to a frolick and being too often at places where

strong liquor is drunk." Apparently the "frolick" of that day was a greater temptation than a young lady could endure, for in April, 1802, Ann McCormick was cited for dancing; in June she appeared and confessed her sorrow for her conduct—and was continued "under the wach care of the church." In August, Ann still persisted in her sin and was excluded. Two young people were excommunicated for similar offenses; the young woman for "danceing, Obstanacecy, and Contemt of the authority of the Church," and Nicholas Cross for "following frollikin' and dancing" and holding the authority of the church in contempt.

Horse-racing was tabooed by the church. Peter Smith was disciplined for racing S. Rogers "and beating said Rogers."

Social sins, such as fornication, adultery, becoming parents of illegitimate children, and rape, were not infrequently brought before the church. A certain doctor at Mt. Moriah was accused by three young women of immodest conduct and with intentions of mistreating them. Another member was accused by an unmarried woman of being the father of her child. Later the woman confessed that she had lied and the man was exonerated. A man of color, "Negro Phil," was brought up for his attempted illicit relations with "Harden's wench"—evidently a slave. Negro Phil made repeated appearances before the church for immoralities. A member at Salem was charged with a like crime. Several cases of fornication and adultery appear. Some of them evidently are cases of divorce and remarriage which the church rejected as unscriptural. Elizabeth Davis was requested to decline communion until "the truth of her having another Husband" was determined. Another member of the Goshen church, Benjamin Stites, was "cut off" because he "married another wife while the former is yet alive." Still another, Ruth Sears, was excluded because she "inter'd into marriage she having A husband yet alive for ought She knows the Church therefor looking on it not agreeable to a Gospel Conversation." The wife of a well-known member, having married another man was called upon to justify her conduct before the church.

The third class of offenses grew out of disobeying the authority of the church, and holding questionable beliefs. Offenses against the church, the greater number of which did not have moral significance, were many. The church members were required to attend every meeting of

the church, both business and worship, or give a valid excuse for their absence. Most of the churches voted, as did Goshen in 1814, and Great Bethel, January 17, 1778, "that any member that has or Shall here after neglect to attend Church Meeting Successively more than twice shall be Suspended from the priviledges of the church until they Give the Church Satisfaction for their Non attendance." Innumerable instances arose in which members were cited for non-attendance. Sometimes a committee was sent to a former member to inquire whether he considered himself a member of the church, and if so, why he neglected the services.

Individuals were disciplined for speaking contemptuously of or ignoring the authority of the church. A man made himself unworthy of the church's privileges for lightly esteeming them, "and for bringing in Railing accusation." Another member was suspended for causing a disturbance in the church and getting angry. A brother was laid under censure for "Speaking Reproachfully and contempting the church." When a member who held the offices of clerk and deacon was excluded there was necessity for a full explanation, which was given in detail. Deacon Thomas Gaddis of Uniontown was excluded from Great Bethel, and eight reasons were given for the resolution, which divided themselves into two groups, namely, failure to perform his duty as deacon and disagreement with the pastor.

Failure to hold to the accepted theological position resulted in serious disciplinary measures. One brother was called upon to explain his faith before the body, whereupon "the church unanimously pronounced it erroneous and disconsonent with the word of God." The church voted to wait a while "with patience hoping the Lord will give him to see and acknowledge his error." A member disagreed with the principles of the church and "declared a Non-fellowship with the church." A number of brethren who had followed a Dr. Hersey in forming a new church repented and were reinstated into the fellowship of Goshen church. Members sometimes joined other denominations, and after an explanation, usually given to a committee, were dropped from the membership roll.

Belief in witchcraft was prevalent among the early settlers in the western country. To the witch was ascribed tremendous power in inflicting strange and incurable maladies, particularly upon children.[4] The accusa-

[4] Doddridge, *Notes*, 161.

tion of being a witch called for immediate suspension and thorough investigation. Just one case of witchcraft appears in the Baptist documents. A member of the Simpson's Creek church, Elizabeth Stout by name, brought an accusation of being a witch against Gwin Denham, the wife of John Denham, a young preacher. The difficulty was unfortunate, for it caused Denham's ordination to be postponed for over a year. The trouble appears in the minutes for October, 1786, when the church resolved "to send a committee to inquire into the difficulty between Elizabeth Stout and sister Denham." The committee brought to the January meeting sworn statements from members. Most of these statements—all of which are given in full in the minutes—are as difficult to understand as the following:

> This is to certify or inform all whome it may properly concern, that as I have bain enquierd of respecting what I know concerning Rhoda Wards vomiting of pins. The following I offer as the whole of my knowledge in the matter which I am willing to be quallified to. As I was at Daniel Stouts at a time when Rhoda Ward lay sick of the Chicken pox I saw her spew up one or two pins that was crooked, and there was others laying on the flore, I expect shee spewed up before: I noticed her and about an hour after she said she knew who gave them to here. The next day she said the person that gave them to her told her that she did it because she had told of her mother and of Mrs. Denham. This to the best of my remembrance is all I know.
>
> (signed) Mary Smith
>
> Witnesses present
> John Loofborrow
> Wm. Davis
> Ths. Bartley

The church conducted a trial which lasted for more than a year. Several witnesses were presented and the sworn statements gathered by the committee were weighed. The matter was dropped finally, and a last effort to bring the two sisters together failed. This was concluded in a significant fashion when in November, 1788, Elizabeth Stout was laid "under suspension for crimes of stealing laid to her charge." In February the next year the church resolved that "our Sister Elizabeth Stout be removed out of the church by Excommunication."

Ministers were not exceptions to the rule of discipline, although it was recognized that such necessary discipline was of a much more serious nature. The Redstone Association found that one of its ministers, Rev.

Benoni Allen had misrepresented facts concerning how much liquor certain delegates drank while at the annual meeting. The entry begins with the lament that "if angels ever weep, it is over the sins of Clergymen," and concludes with a declaration of the falsity of Allen's story. Then follows the terse resolution: "That we have no fellowship with Benoni Allen."

A difficulty arose between the Mt. Moriah church and its pastor, Brother James Sutton, which lasted for several months. The pastor maintained that the "church turned him off as being their Minister against his will," and that the church "cited him to a public settlement." The members became sorry for their part in the quarrel and voted to forgive completely Pastor Sutton and made themselves liable to "the severity of Discipline" if they divulged anything which might cast odium or unbecoming reflections on Brother Sutton. Trouble arose when the Great Bethel minister, Isaac Sutton, performed a marriage ceremony which was declared by the church to be "a breach of the civil law."

A brother, Aaron Lezader, was laid under suspension for saying that John Corbly of Goshen church "preached an unknown Christ." One of the ministers connected with Great Bethel church, John Hopwood, came into much disfavor among the people to whom he preached in an itinerant capacity. The difficulty is described in the following report: "During the late unhapy disturbance in these parts about the Excise law said Hopwood stood firm and true to Government Openly declaring his willingness to Comply with the Execution of said law for which reason he had two leave his home and make his Excape in the month of July 1794 from the thretened Vengence of the insurgants untill they had given over their pretentions to oppose the Execution of the Law."[5] The Great Bethel church gave Hopwood a vote of confidence and an official paper indicating his good standing which gave him the right "to continue to preach the Gospel according to his former Lysences."

The problem of the traveling minister became serious. Ministers migrating from the east often would preach along the way whenever opportunity afforded. Unworthy ministers of immoral character and spurious theology often preached among the churches for some time before they were exposed. Most churches voted to require of every strange min-

[5] Minutes of Great Bethel Church, January 8, 1796.

ister "something to show that he is a member in good standing where he came from."

Long after law and order had been established in western Pennsylvania by officers, courts, and the normal governmental processes, the churches continued to control the social life of their constituents. They demanded and maintained within their organizations a type of practical righteousness beyond that which was required by civil law. Wright and Corbett certainly are right when they declare that strict church discipline, although "it tightened life a little too much, restricted or forbade community and personal pleasures that would have eased the rough road of the pioneers . . . . it was in the long run a beneficent social agency. It focused and made concrete by church doctrine and practice many general ideals by which early settlers tried to live."[6]

[6] J. E. Wright and Doris S. Corbett, *Pioneer Life in Western Pennsylvania*, 157 (Pittsburgh, 1940).