

The Discipline of Baptized Members: Are Baptized Members Subject to the Judicial Process of the Church?

By Gavin Beers

INTRODUCTION

The Reformed have historically identified three marks of the visible church. First, the preaching of the true Apostolic doctrine of the gospel. Second, the administration of the two sacraments appointed by Christ. Third, the Biblical government and discipline of the church. church members are under its discipline, but a related area of confusion concerns how baptized members, who have not yet communed at the Lord's table, stand in relation to this. How should a Kirk Session deal with a baptized member who has grown up in the church but fallen into sin and turned their back on the means of Grace and pastoral care?

Most Reformed churches have helpful books of church order but few of them address this specific case, leaving local sessions unsure how to proceed, or wondering if indeed they should act at all. This problem is not new; Presbyterian and Continental Reformed churches have wrestled with it since the sixteenth century and have laid down helpful principles and practices along the way. At the same time there has been a lack of consensus and the question has been vigorously debated in both traditions, largely over the same points.

THE QUESTION STATED

The specific question we address is, should baptized, non-communicant church members be subject to the formal discipline of the church, up to and including excommunication? This question naturally raises others, such as: at what age might a formal process of discipline become relevant? What sins might it be initiated for? How can someone be excommunicated if they have not communicated at the Lord's Table? Some of these will be addressed as we proceed.

RELATED ISSUES

Children are not recognized as church members in Baptist and Evangelical congregations and so what we are considering is a distinctly Reformed and Presbyterian issue. This highlights the fact that our subject is not merely one of church order, but it is a theological question.

A QUESTION OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

The discipline of baptized church members is ultimately a question of how we see them covenanted to Christ in His church. When we baptize and apply the sign of God's covenant to our children, we recognize them as members of the visible church and included in God's covenant of Grace.¹ This was their status in the Old Testament where God said to Abraham, "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee" (Gen. 17:7). The same promise is reiterated in the

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1. By Covenant of Grace we understand God's covenant made with sinners in time, in which he promises to be their God and the God of their children after them, through Christ the mediator, who they must receive by faith alone. This covenant is distinct from the eternal Covenant of Redemption that God the Father makes with His Son and all His elect people in Him. These two covenants stand in relation to each other in that the Covenant of Grace is God's appointed means in time to bring all those given to the Son in the Covenant of Redemption to faith in Him.

New Testament, “For the promise is unto you and your children, and to all who are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:39). So the Westminster Confession of Faith, in its codification of the doctrine of the church states:

The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children.²

This covenant status brings the children of the church under privileges, responsibilities and sanctions. God has covenanted to be their God and they live under His covenant promises but they can come short of them (Heb. 4:1–2). They can break the covenant and bring its sanctions on themselves. As their covenant status is inextricably linked to their membership of the visible church, the discipline of the visible church then bears upon this relation.

THE RELATION BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND THE FAMILY

The church of Christ is made up of individuals to whom God chooses to administer His covenant, with the inclusion of families. This introduces a potential tension between parental and church authority. It is important therefore to recognize that God has instituted the church and the family with their own distinct jurisdiction and government. In the family, God has given parents authority to instruct their children and to discipline them with the rod of correction (Eph. 6:4; Prov. 22:15; 29:15). In the church God has given elders authority to instruct her members and to discipline them with keys of the kingdom (Heb. 13:17; Matt. 16:18; 18:17–18). One helpful way to think of this distinct jurisdiction in relation to our question is that it was the church by its authority that baptized the children into membership, not the parents. This authority has ongoing relevance in the baptized member’s life.

THE NATURE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

As we work through the historical debates over the

2. *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian, 2003), 25.2, 106–107.

3. John B. Romeyn, “The Duty of the Church in the Instruction and Discipline of Her Baptized Children,” in *Home, The School and the Church; or the Presbyterian Education Repository*, ed. C. Van

discipline of baptized members, we will see that lines were drawn around different understandings of what the church is and what her discipline is. Some saw the church more in terms of a voluntary society and therefore only those who voluntarily commit to her by profession of faith are under her formal discipline. This group also tended to define excommunication in narrow terms in relation to the Lord’s Table, arguing that if a person had not communicated at the Lord’s Table they could not be excommunicated. Others rejected the voluntary view of the church and considered her as the sovereignly constituted covenant people of God. From here they considered all who God included in church membership to be under her whole discipline, and they viewed excommunication not only as a cutting off from the Lord’s Table, but as a removal from the visible church.

HISTORICAL REVIEW

Taking our starting point in the Old Testament church it is clear that the Israel’s circumcised youth were under covenant discipline. In Deuteronomy 21:18–21 a rebellious son was taken by his parents to the elders who, upon finding him guilty, executed a judicial sentence that removed him from the covenant people by death. We might ask if this has any bearing on the formal discipline of baptized children today?

Moving into the New Testament the Old Testament covenantal principle of household inclusion in the church continues. Furthermore, when Paul wrote to the church in a certain place, e.g. Ephesus or Colosse, he included the children as part of the congregation and placed the responsibility of obedience as much on them as other members (Eph. 6:1ff). In Corinth, where there was a case of church discipline for immorality in the congregation (1 Cor. 5), Paul goes on to address the covenant status of children in the same Epistle as *holy* or set apart to God (1 Cor. 7:14). While this does not constitute an example of formal discipline of a non-communicating baptized member, it does provide a New Testament theology of who is a member of the church from which individuals are being cut off.

EARLY CHURCH AND THE REFORMATION PERIOD.

Moving into the post apostolic history of the church we find evidence that the early church exercised a disciplinary care over her baptized children. An 1812 Committee report to the US Presbyterian General Assembly on the church’s relation to her baptized children,³ records:

The Primitive Church considered herself as the common mother of all baptized children and exercised a corresponding care over them, that they might be trained up as a generation to serve the Lord.⁴

The report goes on to demonstrate that discipline was applied to baptized members for delinquent behaviour and cites Augustine in the fourth century on the matter.⁵ Augustine speaks of “stripes,” being used, not only by parents, but by bishops in their consistories.⁶ Two centuries later one of the rules of Isidore of Seville was that baptized members who were still in their minority “should not be punished by excommunication, but according to the quality of their negligence or offence, be corrected with congruous stripes.”⁷ It appears from these examples that children in their minority were disciplined corporally and when out of their minority they would be subject to a formal process that could lead to excommunication. While we believe that such corporal discipline of children by the church is a confusion of her jurisdiction with that of the parent, what is apparent here is a clear recognition that the church had authority over all of her baptized children.

The Reformed church of the sixteenth century was also conscious that her baptized children were under her care. W. Van’t Spijker⁸ has written a helpful article from a Dutch perspective which highlights the views of some key individuals. He begins with Martin Bucer who instructed young children in a catechism on the nature of church discipline and their relation to it. After teaching them that the keys of the kingdom are in the hands of church officers and are to be used “to warn against and punish sins, to bind and excommunicate those who refuse to repent,” and “to loose and in grace receive those who desire to repent.” He asks the child:

What am I to learn from this?

- a) To readily allow myself to be warned and punished;
- b) To readily warn my neighbour;
- c) To value highly, and diligently make use of church discipline and comfort.⁹

Van’t Spijker then considers John à Lasco (1499–1560) and Martin Micron (1523–59), who together ministered to the Dutch Refugee congregations in London in the mid-sixteenth Century. À Lasco drafted a book of church order and Micron later described their practice of discipline in his work *Christian Ordinances*.¹⁰

When they have reached the age of (around) 14 years and have not been taught sufficiently the principles of the Christian life or they live licentiously, and they despise the private admonitions of the brethren, then the ministers shall admonish and rebuke them in the light of the Word of God. The ministers also shall investigate the cause of their ignorance or licentiousness with the purpose to lead them to a godly life. If it appears that the parents are in part to be blamed for their children’s licentiousness, then they shall first be admonished. If the parents despise these admonitions, then they shall be rebuked for their gross sin in accordance with Christian order and discipline. If, however, it appears that the children alone are to be blamed and not the parents, then one shall comfort the parents and consult with them as to how the unruliness of the

Rensselaer, 10 vols. (Philadelphia: [Board of Education of the Presbyterian Church], 1850-1860), 5:27–68.

4. Romeyn, “The Duty of the Church,” 39.

5. The report cites *Epis. 159, to Marcellinus*. This is Letter 133 in the modern numbering. See Augustine, *Letters, NPNF1*, page 470–471. “Do not lose now that fatherly care which you maintained when prosecuting the examination, in doing which you extracted the confession of such horrid crimes, not by stretching them on the rack, not by furrowing their flesh with iron claws, not by scorching them with flames, but by beating them with rods, a mode of correction used by schoolmasters, and by parents themselves in chastising children, and often also by bishops in the sentences awarded by them.”

6. Romeyn, “The Duty of the Church,” 40. Cf. Benedict, *Codex Regularum*, chp. 17, De excommunicatis, Migne, PL 103, col. 569. In minori aetate constituti non sunt coercendi sententia excommunicationis, sed pro qualitate negligentiae congruis emendandi sunt plagis.

7. Romeyn, 40.

8. W. Van’t Spijker, “De Tucht over Doopleden,” *Ambtelijk Contact*, 1 November 1982, 6–9, www.digibron.nl (accessed 21 February 2019). Quotations here are from a somewhat abridged English translation by Pastor L. W. Bilkes of the Free Reformed Churches of North America, in *Diakonia*, Vol.11, No.1 (June 1997): 7–19. See also Pieter VanderMeyden, *Church Discipline of Baptized Members*, in *Officebearers Journal*, Vol. 1 (Spring 2018): 15–36, published by the Theological Education Committee, Free Reformed Churches of North America.

9. Van’t Spijker, *De Tucht*. Martin Bucer, *Der kürztzer Catechismus und erklärung der xii Stücken Christihs glaubens* (1537). See the text in *Martin Bucers Deutsche Schriften*, vol. 6/3, *Martin Bucers Katechismen aus den Jarhren 1534, 1537, 1543*, ed. Robert Stupperich (Gutersloh, 1987). See also Van’t Spijker, *The Ecclesiastical Offices in the Thought of Martin Bucer*, *Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought* v. 57 (Brill, 1996), 162.

10. Martin Micron was assistant minister to à Lasco in the Dutch Refugees church in London. In 1554 he published a work in Dutch entitled *Christian Ordinances of the Dutch Refugees Churches in London*. Van’t Spijker quotes from this work. See Martinus Mikron (Microen), *De christlicke ordinancien der Nederlantscher ghemeynten Christi, die vanden christelicken prince co. Edewaerdts den VI. in’t iaer 1550. te Londen inghestelt was* (Gedruckt buyten London: doer Collinus Volckwiner, 1554). See John à Lasco, *Forma ac Ratio*, in *Joannis à Lasco Opera*, ed. Abraham Kuyper, Vol. 2 (Amsterdam, 1866), 1–283.

children can best be curbed. In the meantime the ministers of the Word shall reprimand and rebuke (though with wisdom) these children by impressing upon them the divine threats. If nevertheless in this way they do not mend their ways, then they shall not be admitted to the use of the Lord's Supper until they shall have come to repentance. If despite keeping them from the Lord's Supper and rebuking them, some one among these children is not touched but rather continues in all wickedness to despise his parents (which sin in accordance with God's ordinance ought to be punished with death), then when he will have reached the age of 18 or 20, he will be excommunicated from the congregation as a despiser of the grace and of the covenant of God, and the congregation shall grieve over him for following the world. From the excommunication of such children, one can learn that it is not sufficient to have received the seal of the covenant, baptism, in our young years. We dishonour Christ while having his Name on our forehead, unless our life is in accordance with His Name.¹¹

So baptized children were under the oversight of the church elders who exercised care alongside their parents and as a help to them. If parental correction was rejected, the minister and elders rebuked the baptized youth directly and if he did not repent, he was formally disciplined. Deuteronomy 21:18–21 was appealed to as a relevant Scriptural text and excommunication was

“from the congregation as a despiser of the grace and covenant of God.”

DEBATES IN THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCHES.

The Refugee Church procedure was clear but later in the same century a question was asked to the Synod of Dordt in 1578:¹² “Are children who have been baptized in the Reformed congregation, when they have reached years of discretion, subject to church discipline, and will those who after they have been admonished continue to harden their hearts be excommunicated, although they have not yet professed their faith and have not yet partaken of the Lord's Supper?”¹³ The answer of the Synod was that baptized members should be admonished in general in the public preaching but that excommunication should only be used against those “to whom the covenant of God had been sealed in their participation in the Lord's supper.”¹⁴ À Lasco's position was rejected and moving into the seventeenth century Gisbertus Voetius (1588–1676) was influential in consolidating the view of the 1578 Synod. Voetius considered baptized children as incomplete church members who were under church discipline only as it pertained to nurture and therefore not the subjects of excommunication. The reason he gave for this was that they had not voluntarily or consciously entered the congregation of believers.¹⁵

Jacobus Koelman (1632–95) disagreed with Voetius' position and believed it to be contrary to the “Form of Baptism”¹⁶ which declared baptized children to be sanctified in Christ and members of the church. For Koelman their inclusion in the church brought with it the obligation to live in obedience to God as members of the covenant and so he argued that if they go delinquent, they are to be removed from the church and regarded as publicans. Furthermore, he challenged the idea that baptized members were only under the discipline of nurture by asking on what basis did the church have the right to discipline by admonition but not to excommunicate.¹⁷

So, a difference of opinion on our question arose early in the history of the Dutch Reformed churches. The same difference was later found in the Secession churches¹⁸ in the nineteenth Century. Hendrik DeCock, like Koelman, considered church membership to be based on God's promise and therefore baptized children were considered members because they were included in this promise. As members they were therefore subject to church discipline, including excommunication. H. P. Scholte looked at the issue more narrowly like Voetius and denied formal discipline should be applied. In 1857

11. Van't Spijker, *De Tucht*.

12. The 1578 Synod of Dordrecht met from June 2–18, and was the first properly National Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church.

13. Van't Spijker, *De Tucht*.

14. Van't Spijker, *De Tucht*.

15. Van't Spijker comments “Voetius expresses some restriction with regard to the membership of non-communicant members.” For this he quotes William Ames (*Medulla* I, 32, 13): “Nevertheless the young children are not complete members of the church in the sense that they can participate in the actions of fellowship or partake of all privileges of the church.”

16. The form for the administration of infant baptism in the Dutch Reformed Churches first appeared in a 1566 edition of the Dutch Psalter edited by Petrus Dathenus.

17. Van't Spijker, *De Tucht*.

18. The 1834 Secession from the established Dutch Church (NHK) was led by a number of young ministers (de Cock, Scholte, van Raalte, Brummelkamp). They publicly opposed the toleration of heresies within the NHK, together with the imposition of man-made uninspired materials of praise into the public worship of God. They also promoted a return to the Reformed Confessions and vowed to return to the national Church when it returned to its former adherence to these things. The years that followed were confusing and a proliferation of small groups appeared. Two of these finally united and formed the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in 1869.

the issue came to the Synod¹⁹ who refused to lay down any specific rules on the matter.²⁰

After the union of 1892 the Gereformeerde Kerken²¹ examined the matter and in 1896 a report was submitted which took Voetius' position. In 1925 the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken addressed the subject and adopted a procedure to be followed.²² Some of the key features of this report are summarized as follows:

- a. It is agreed in principle that baptized members are under the discipline of the church.
- b. This discipline is to be applied in different ways at different stages, i.e. to members under 16, between 16–21 and over 21 years old.
- c. Members under the age of 16 should only be admonished. Over 16 they become subject to formal process.
- d. While arguing for liability to formal process the procedure stops short of using the language of excommunication.
- e. However, the end of the process is a public pronouncement that the person no longer belongs to the church.

DEBATES IN THE PRESBYTERIAN TRADITION.

The debates in the Presbyterian tradition revolved around the same issues to those of their continental brothers but the question seems to have arisen later, with most of the discussion taking place in the nineteenth Century. We have seen that the Westminster Confession of Faith views the children of believers as members of the visible church. This is affirmed in the Assembly's Directory of Public Worship in the Form of Baptism.

The promise is made to believers and their seed; and that the seed and posterity of the faithful, born within the church, have, by their birth, interest in the covenant, and right to the seal of it, and to the outward privileges of the church, under the gospel, no less than the children of Abraham in the time of the Old Testament ... That children, by baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and united with believers; and that all who are baptized in the name of Christ, do renounce, and by their baptism are bound

to fight against the devil, the world, and the flesh: That they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are they baptized....²³

In her General Assembly of 1642 the Church of Scotland decreed: "Every Presbytery is enjoined to proceed against non-communicating members."²⁴ There does not appear to be any reference to the age this process would be relevant from but Steuart of Pardovan, writing in the early 1700's, records that male children over the age of fourteen were judged to be out of their minority and could be summoned before the church judicatories and charged with offences.²⁵

In America, the 1789 Book of Discipline of the Presbyterian Church addresses the question of baptized members and discipline in these words:

19. The Synod of the Gereformeerde Kerk.

20. "The synod, upon thorough deliberation, is of the opinion that no specific rules should be laid down for this. Rather, it should be left to the modest judgment of the councils to deal with them in meekness as faithfully and edifyingly as possible." Quoted in Van't Spijker, *De Tucht*.

21. In 1892 part of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk joined with the Doleantie to form the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland. The Doleantie, led by Abraham Kuyper, had left the national Church in 1886.

22. This is reproduced in Van't Spijker, *De Tucht*.

23. "The Directory for the Publick Worship of God," in *The Westminster Confession of Faith; the Larger and Shorter Catechism*, etc. (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1855), 382–383.

24. Romeyn, "The Duty of the Church," 36. The Act referred to is Act Sess. 7. 3. August 1642 in *A true copy of the whole printed acts of the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland, beginning at the Assembly holden at Glasgow the 27. day of November 1638; and ending at the Assembly, holden at Edinburgh the 6. day of August. 1649 (1682)*, 120. The Act reads "The Assembly would enjoyn every Presbyterie to proceed against Non-communicants, whether Papiſts or others, according to the Act of Parliament made thereanent. And suchlike, that Acts of Parliament against prophaners of the Sabbath be put to execution." In a footnote Romeyn states, "A similar rule is contained in the discipline of the French Reformed Churches, chap. 12, can. 11, Quick's Synodicon, Vol. 1." John Quick, *Synodicon in Gallia Reformata, or, the Acts, Decisions, Decrees, and Canons of those famous National Councils of the Reformed Churches in France*, 2 vols. (London, 1692), xlvi.

25. Walter Steuart Pardovan, *Collections and Observations Concerning the Worship, Discipline and Government of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: W. Gray, 1770), 215. Pardovan writes "When minors are convened before church judicatories, their curators are not to be cited as before civil courts, though they may be acquainted therewith, that their pupils may receive suitable advice and instruction from them. A minor, that is a male past fourteen, and a female past twelve years of age, may be called before church judicatories, when guilty; as for pupils under that age, it will be rare if ever they be concerned as delinquents, except "ubi militia supplet aetatem," that is, where strength of nature is as far advanced in them as it useth to be in others of riper years."

All baptized persons are members of the church, are under its care, and subject to its government and discipline; and when they have arrived at the years of discretion, they are bound to perform all the duties of church members.²⁶

The first query raised concerning this was brought to the 1798 General Assembly who answered that the statement was clear on the matter.²⁷ Questions arose again about a decade later and in 1811 the Synod of Kentucky submitted an overture to the General Assembly asking:

What steps should the church take with baptized youth, not in communion, but arrived at the age of maturity, should such youth prove disorderly or contumacious?²⁸

The Assembly appointed a Committee of three men—Dr. Samuel Miller, Rev. W. B. Romeyn and Rev. James B. Richards to prepare a report for the next General Assembly. The report which was largely the work of Romeyn, was submitted to the 1812 general assembly who ordered it to be published and sent down to presbyteries for consideration. Several presbyteries reported their views to the 1814 Assembly where it was discussed in a number of sessions, but on the final day “the subject was indefinitely postponed.”²⁹ The matter was left as it was in the documents of the church.

The report runs to around forty pages, and the argument proceeds by establishing from Scripture and the Reformed Confessions that baptized children are members of the church. Because they are members of the church they are subject to Christian discipline—just as children are subject to the rule of the house, so baptized members are subject to the rule of the church. Discipline is then broken up into its two component parts of instruction and correction with the duty of the church to instruct her baptized children comprising the largest

section in the report. The duty of the church to administer discipline to her baptized Children is addressed next and here the image used in the early church, of the church as the mother of all her baptized members, is invoked. It is then argued that the administration of such discipline is a duty that lies on all those in ecclesiastical authority and a privilege of all those under it, and this applies to all three aspects of discipline—admonition, suspension and excommunication. Appeal is made to the practice of the Old Testament church of admitting its circumcised youth to the full responsibilities of membership at the age of thirteen when they became a “son of the commandment,”³⁰ which implied they would then bear personal responsibility to perform all the duties of covenant membership. Argument is also made from Genesis 17:14, which refers to the formal *cutting off* of members for the stated purpose of breaking God’s covenant. From this it is urged that if baptized members do not fulfil the duties of church membership when they come of age, then they should be excommunicated. As the chief duty of membership is to exercise faith in Christ as Saviour it is reasoned that failure to believe and profess faith should make them liable to excommunication.

It is not our intention to discuss the propriety of their conclusion at this point but simply to note that the report clearly acknowledged that baptized members are under the church’s formal discipline and can be excommunicated.

THE REVISED BOOK OF DISCIPLINE

Discussion of the 1812 report was indefinitely postponed by the 1814 General Assembly and the matter was left as it was stated in the book of discipline. Four decades later controversy arose when a Committee was appointed in 1857 to revise the book of Discipline.³¹ The committee included Charles Hodge and Robert J. Breckinridge, with James Henley Thornwell as chairman. When their work was circulated to the church a number of proposed changes were met with varying degrees of opposition, but the most fiercely contested issue was the proposed change to the paragraph on baptized members. The revised book recast the original statement as follows:

All baptized persons, being members of the church, are under its government and training, and when they have arrived at years of discretion, they are bound to perform all the duties of members. Only those, however, who have made a profession of faith in Christ, are proper subjects of judicial prosecution.³²

26. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia 1789), 175.

27. Old School, “The Relation of Baptized Children to the Church—No 1,” *Central Presbyterian* 5.41 (October 13, 1856): 165.

28. Romeyn, “The Duty of the Church,” 27. This is quoted in an editorial introduction to Romeyn’s report.

29. Romeyn, 28.

30. This is a reference to the Jewish tradition of religious initiation when a boy undergoes his Bar-mitzvah.

31. During this time, in 1837, the Presbyterian Church split into its Old School and New School factions. The subsequent debate over the revision of the book of discipline took place in the Old School Assembly, but the discussion of the matter extended far beyond Church courts with articles appearing in many Presbyterian and other religious periodicals.

32. *Revised Book of Discipline Prepared by the Committee of the*

Here the word *discipline* was replaced with *training* and the formal process of discipline was reserved for communicant members alone. Thornwell as chairman of the committee was active in defence of the proposed changes against its critics. Some of these were found in the committee itself, with Charles Hodge publicising his disagreement with the new statement.³³ R. L. Dabney was prominent among the critics in the wider church and he and Thornwell debated the change,³⁴ with Thornwell defending his position in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*.³⁵ Many other articles appeared in Presbyterian periodicals, including an ongoing seven-month debate in the *Central Presbyterian* between Rev. George D. Armstrong and a writer calling himself 'Old School.' Armstrong rejected the idea that non-communicating members could be subject to judicial process and excommunication, while Old School defended the older book of discipline.³⁶ The Baptists chimed in too, with one article in the *Richmond Herald* noting the revision was "a manifest departure from Presbyterian Paedobaptism of the Old School."³⁷ This would not have allayed the fears of many who thought the changes were moving the church to a more Baptist view of church membership.

In the end, the revisions to the book of discipline did not go through. Larger events took over that would split the church in 1861 into its Northern and Southern bodies. The Northern Church reverted to the position of the original book of order while Thornwell's view prevailed in the South into the twentieth century, but in that century conservative Presbyterian churches were to revert to the position of the older book of discipline. The *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) states: "All baptized persons, being members of the Church are subject to its discipline and entitled to the benefits thereof."³⁸ The Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) is more precise in specifying the inclusion of baptized members in the judicial discipline of the church: "All members of the church, both communicants and those who are members by virtue of baptism only, are under the care of the church, and subject to ecclesiastical discipline including administrative and judicial discipline."³⁹ The Presbyterian Reformed Church (PRC) includes a statement directly from the original 1789 Constitution and book of order: "Inasmuch as all baptized persons are members of the church, they are under its care, and subject to its government and discipline."⁴⁰ The Practice of the Free Church of Scotland, which is adhered to by the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), states in its chapter on discipline:

With whom it deals: Church discipline is concerned with those who belong to the Church as baptized or communicant members. Besides, the Church has a duty to all, and especially to those in regular attendance at worship services, to testify "of righteousness, temperance and judgement to come," but this is not strictly within its disciplinary function.⁴¹

Initiation of Process: It is normally the duty of the Kirk Session to initiate a process of discipline affecting the membership of the congregation apart from the minister. Membership includes baptized and communicant members who adhere to the congregation.⁴²

THE MAIN VIEWS

From this history two main views on the relation of baptized members to the discipline of the church emerge; one that sees the applicability of formal discipline to all members of the church and the other that reserves such discipline for communicant members. There are various nuanced positions within both these views but we will now examine each main view and make the case that baptized children are under the

General Assembly, August 1858, 25. Accessed at <http://www.pcahistory.org>. The original book of order had stated "All baptized persons are members of the church, are under its care, and subject to its government and discipline; and when they have arrived at the years of discretion, they are bound to perform all the duties of church members."

33. Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (New York: Scriber & Sons, 1878), 215–218.

34. Their exchange can be found respectively in Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions*, Vol. 2. (Sprinkle, 1982), 312–392, and, James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, Vol. 4 Ecclesiastical (Banner of Truth, 1986), 298–380.

35. *Southern Presbyterian Review*, Vol. 12, #3 (April 1859): 378–406. See also Vol. 13, # 1 (1860): 1–39. We will refer to these articles as they are reproduced in *The Collected Writings*.

36. The original exchange is entitled "The Relation of Baptized Children to the Church," published in *The Central Presbyterian*, Vol. 5, #39–55 (1860), Vol. 6, #1, (1861).

37. Peter J. Wallace, "The Bond of Union": *The Old School Presbyterian Church and the American Nation, 1837–1861*, Doctoral Dissertation (The University of Notre Dame, 2004), 600.

38. *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 6th Edition, 27–2 (Lawrenceville, GA. 2009), www.pcahistory.org (accessed 21 February 2019).

39. *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA), 87, www.opc.org (accessed 21 February 2019).

40. *The Book of Discipline of the Presbyterian Reformed Church*, article 70, <https://presbyterianreformed.org> (accessed 21 February 2019).

41. *The Practice of the Free Church of Scotland In Her Several Courts*, 8th Edition (Knox Press, Edinburgh, 1995), 89.

42. *The Practice of the Free Church of Scotland*, 94

discipline of the church and subject to formal process up to and including excommunication. We will proceed by first looking at the arguments against this position and then answer each of these in turn as a means of establishing the case.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE FORMAL DISCIPLINE OF BAPTIZED MEMBERS.

Some of these arguments were introduced when looking at the history of the Dutch church and we did not rehearse them when working through the Presbyterian history. They are summarized below in six key points.

1. THE CHURCH IS A VOLUNTARY SOCIETY.

In the seventeenth century Voetius articulated this view. He wrote at a time when the *Independentists*⁴³ were pressing their conviction that the holiness of the church demanded a membership based on the choice of faith. While Voetius opposed their view and argued from the doctrine of the covenant that baptized children were members of the church, he saw this as membership in an incomplete sense. As a consequence, Voetius believed they could not be formally disciplined because they had not consciously entered the fellowship of believers.⁴⁴ In the U.S.A. Thornwell saw the church as a voluntary society with voluntary assent of its members

43. Van't Spijker, *De Tucht*. The Independentists had Congregationalist leanings, pressing the autonomy of the local church in the federation and also the authority of the congregation in relation to the local elders.

44. Van't Spijker, *De Tucht*.

45. Wallace, "The Bond of Union," 620.

46. Thornwell's view of the Church raises concerns in other related aspects. He describes the Church as "the complete realization of the decree of election" and so seems to conflate the covenant and election. Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, Vol. 4, 350–351. Further he goes on to define the visible church as "the society or congregation of those who profess true religion," leaving out their children which the Westminster Confession of Faith is careful to include (WCF 25:2).

47. This is assuming a majority view in the history of the Reformed Church over against the doctrine of Paedo-Communion.

48. Thornwell, 4.328.

49. Thornwell, 4.328.

50. Thornwell, 4.329, "Discipline is for the living and not for the dead. It is not an ordinance for conversion, but an ordinance for repentance." Here Thornwell denies that discipline can be used in any sense as a means of conversion. In so doing he employs the term repentance in a narrow way that excludes it from initial conversion. He likewise speaks of conversion in a strict sense relating to the beginning of the Christian life. Others speak of conversion more broadly as the fruit of regeneration with initial and continuing repentance and faith as component parts.

51. Thornwell, 4.329.

necessary for their discipline. Peter Wallace comments on Thornwell's position: "The Thornwellian view assumed a theory of republicanism that insisted upon the consent of the governed—or in this case, the consent of the disciplined."⁴⁵ So the argument here is that if the baptized member has not voluntarily professed faith, then the church cannot make them the subject of formal discipline.⁴⁶

2. BAPTIZED MEMBERS DO NOT HAVE ALL THE PRIVILEGES OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

All sides of the debate agree to this in principle. For instance, baptized members are not automatically given a right to the Lord's Table,⁴⁷ nor can they hold office in the church or, if still in their minority, vote to elect office bearers. Some however press this further to conclude that liability to formal process is another of the aspects of church membership that baptized members do not have a right to. There is certainly force in the logic of the argument—if baptism does not immediately entitle to all the privileges of church membership, then it is not automatic that baptized members should be deemed liable to formal disciplinary process.

3. CHURCH DISCIPLINE REQUIRES SPIRITUAL LIFE IN THE ONE BEING DISCIPLINED.

Thornwell stated the position in this way: "Church Discipline is for the living and not for the dead."⁴⁸ Therefore, evidence of life, asserted in a profession of faith, was a condition of being under the discipline of the Church. For Thornwell: "To those who profess no faith in Christ it is as absurd to dispense the spiritual censures of the Church, as it would be to tie a dead man to the whipping post and chastise him with rods."⁴⁹

4. THE PURPOSE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

Thornwell and others make a presumption of regeneration, expressed in profession of faith, to be the condition of church discipline. It follows that they view the purpose of church discipline in only corrective and restorative terms. Yes, discipline is established to glorify Christ, clear the good name of the church, recover the offender and warn the other members of the church. However, it is never a means to awaken the dead in conversion.⁵⁰ If this is so, then why would the church formally censure a baptized non-communing member? What would its purpose be if "Faith is an indispensable condition of the benefit of discipline?"⁵¹

5. THE SUBJECTS OF EXCOMMUNICATION

Here it is argued that only those who partake at the Lord's Table can be the proper subjects of formal discipline, because if there has been no communion then there can be no ex-communication. In light of this Thornwell taught that excommunication removed the offender from the communion of saints in that they were denied access to the Lord's Table for an indefinite period of time.⁵² As a non-communicant member had never had this privilege, it could not be taken from him. This was the position of the 1578 Synod of Dordt which asserted, "therefore excommunication shall not be used except against those to whom the covenant of God is sealed anew through the Lord's Supper."⁵³ Voetius also argued on this basis against the formal discipline of baptized members: "I don't see how the actual church discipline can be applied to them, in view of the fact that they never by profession of faith in the church covenant were admitted to the Lord's Supper fellowship. How then could they be excluded from it?"⁵⁴

6. THE NATURE OF EXCOMMUNICATION.

We saw that Thornwell denied the propriety of disciplining non-communicant members because he considered excommunication as a removal of the right to participation at the Lord's Table. His view appears to be behind the statement in the revised book of discipline, but it was not peculiar to him in the American debates of this period. Rev. George D. Armstrong argued a similar position in his debate with 'Old School' in the *Central Presbyterian* (1860–61).⁵⁵

In distinction to this, Dabney argued that excommunication excluded someone not only from the Lord's Table, but from the church itself, and put them on the same footing as a heathen man, i.e. the unbaptized or in Old Testament terms, the uncircumcised.⁵⁶ Thornwell considered this view "absurd"⁵⁷ and argued that if this were the case, then an excommunicated person who repented would have to be re-baptized to enter church communion again and then and we would all be Anabaptists.⁵⁸ While there is a degree to which Thornwell and Dabney are talking past each other in their debates, there is also a real difference in how they view excommunication.

ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF THE FORMAL DISCIPLINE OF BAPTIZED MEMBERS.

The view we are arguing for is that baptized members

are the proper subjects of ecclesiastical discipline, up to and including excommunication. To make our case we will respond to each of the previous arguments.

1. THE CHURCH IS NOT A VOLUNTARY SOCIETY.

To Thornwell the voluntary nature of the church was an aspect of her glory,⁵⁹ but we contend that he did not get that view from Scripture. The church is the visible kingdom and covenant people of God. God Himself has sovereignly determined those He would include in it and therefore who we should recognize as members. God appeared to Abraham and declared, "I am almighty God" (Gen. 17:1). He sovereignly and unilaterally established His covenant with Abraham and his seed and did not wait for Isaac's choice before He included him in it, held out its promises to him or threatened its sanctions (v. 14). In the same way the baptized child in the New Testament church does not choose whether he will be born into God's covenant, nor can he choose to opt out of its sanctions because he did not voluntarily agree to them. These sanctions are administered through the discipline of the church, including being cut off (excommunicated) for breaking the covenant. To take an analogy from civic life, a citizen cannot avoid the penalties of the law of the country he was born in because he never personally chose to live under them. Dabney argues from this:

"Now it is just as much God's ordinance for mankind that his people shall live under ecclesiastical government, and that their children shall be subjected to ecclesiastical jurisdiction by birth. They have no option allowed them by God..."⁶⁰

The church is not a voluntary society, but it is a tragic irony that we frequently hear the argument that it is, not from the pen of godly theologians, but from the lips

52. Thornwell, 4:324, 343.

53. Van't Spijker, *De Tucht*.

54. Van't Spijker, *De Tucht*.

55. "The Relation of Baptized Children to the Church," *The Central Presbyterian*, 5, #39–55 (1860), 6, #1 (1861). Armstrong argues that baptized members are not in the communion of the Church and so the excommunication of non-communicants is impossible (5:39; 5:40; 5:41).

56. Brian T. Wingard, *As the Lord Puts Words in her Mouth: The Supremacy of Scripture in the Ecclesiology of James Henley Thornwell and its Influence upon the Presbyterian Churches of the South*, Doctoral Dissertation (Westminster Theological Seminary, 1992), 185.

57. Thornwell, 4:339.

58. Thornwell, 4:343–344.

59. Wallace, "The Bond of Union."

60. Dabney, *Discussions*, Vol. 2, 386.

erring baptized members. They refuse the calls of their elders, reject the letters of their pastor and the formal citations of their Kirk Session on this basis, saying, “I never joined your church. I never asked for your care. Please do not contact me again.”

2. BAPTIZED MEMBERS DO NOT HAVE ALL PRIVILEGES OF MEMBERSHIP, BUT ARE UNDER CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

The argument is proposed that because baptized members do not automatically have the right to all the privileges of church membership, e.g. the Lord’s Table, it does not follow that they are the subjects of formal disciplinary process. Additionally, if a profession of faith is required for communing at the table, it should not be thought strange if the same condition is a requirement for formal church discipline. This argument does not hold for the following reasons:

a. *Scriptural*: Scripture explicitly places a condition on coming to the Lord’s Table. Paul makes personal self-examination and an ability to discern the Lord’s body a precondition of partaking of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:28–29). God also gives the keys of the kingdom to the elders of the church to open and shut the privilege of communion to people on the basis of a credible profession of faith, but Scripture places no such explicit stipulation on baptized members in regard to being subject to church discipline (Matt. 16:19; 18:18; 1 Cor. 4:1).

b. *Analogical*: If we look again to civic life, we find different levels of privilege and responsibility given to citizens of a nation. Dabney highlights this while pointing out all citizens are subject to the law and judicial penalty: “In the state, all citizens are not entitled to all grades of privilege, nor liable to all kinds of public duty... but all are alike subject to those general laws which prosecute crime judicially.” To this it might be replied that the analogy does not fit, and the church is more like a school for her baptized members where there

is no judicial prosecution. Dabney responds: “There is no school on earth where pupils may break all the rules, and uniformly neglect the instructions, and yet the master have not power to declare their connection with the school severed.”⁶¹

c. *Logical*: It is argued that while baptized members are not subject to the formal discipline of the church, they are under her general discipline and nurture, and that consequently they may be admonished but not excommunicated. To this the question must be asked that Koelman asked of the Voetians,⁶²—what is the basis for this distinction? In other words, what right does the church have to admonish and rebuke its baptized members but not formally discipline them? Furthermore, how would that general rebuke be any different from and constitute a privilege to the baptized member beyond the general rebuke that might go out to all unbaptized people from the Word in their station and circumstances? It appears to be a claim for a distinction without any biblical foundation, that reduces the privilege of the baptized to no more than a general admonition of the Word of God.⁶³

The argument of equivalence from the stipulated condition for partaking of the Lord’s Supper to the case of formal church discipline does not hold for the reasons above, and therefore we reject the claim that because baptized members are not automatically entitled to all privileges of church membership, they are therefore not under her formal discipline until they profess faith.

3. ADMINISTRATION OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE IS NOT BASED ON THE PRESUMED REGENERACY OF THE SUBJECT.

Thornwell articulated this vividly. For him, church discipline is for the living and not for the dead and therefore you may as well tie a corpse to a post and whip it as discipline a baptized non-communing member.⁶⁴

There is much that could be said in response to this, including his invalid assumption of the unregeneracy of all baptized non-communing members, but the thing we would highlight is that the argument is in the end self-defeating—especially when it comes to excommunication. It defeats itself because if discipline is predicated on the presence of life, and excommunication is the declaration that the person is not to be regarded as a Christian, but a heathen man and a publican, the end of the process is a presumption of non-regeneration, which means that in retrospect the whole basis for the disciplinary process crumbles. To put it in Thornwell’s own terms, all along you have been whipping a corpse.

61. Dabney, *Discussions*, Vol. 2, 386, 388.

62. Van’t Spijker, *De Tucht*.

63. *The Practice of the Free Church*, page 89, seems to make a better distinction at this point in identifying whom the discipline of the Church concerns. It says “Church discipline is concerned with those who belong to the Church as baptized or communicant members. Besides, the Church has a duty to all, and especially to those in regular attendance at worship services, to testify “of righteousness, temperance and judgement to come,” but this is not strictly within its disciplinary function.” Here the right of baptized members to discipline is preserved while the general admonition and rebuke of the Word is still to be brought to the those who are not members.

64. Thornwell, 4:329.

Indeed, in a strange statement Thornwell seems to concede the point himself, saying: “When men show by their contumacy that they were not sons, they are then cut off from the church, on the very ground that they are incapable of discipline.”⁶⁵

Here he seems to detach excommunication from discipline so that the end of the process is an announcement that such people cannot really be disciplined, or that their discipline has failed. They are, according to Thornwell, “cut off,” or we might say disciplined, on the basis “that they are incapable of discipline,” which does not make a whole lot of sense. This is not how the Bible views discipline. In Scripture ecclesiastical discipline is the application of the rules of God’s Word to those God tells us to include as members of His church, in a kingdom that Jesus tells us is mixed. The church does not baptize children on the presumption they are regenerate; nor do we admit someone into communicant membership in the knowledge that they are regenerate, but on the basis of a credible profession of faith; and so we do not discipline any member—baptized or communicant—on the basis that they are regenerate. We include them in God’s church and hold them to God’s standard.

4. THE PURPOSE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

Associated with the previous point and the idea that church discipline is only for the spiritually alive (and the assumption that baptized members are not), it is claimed that non-communing members should not be disciplined because such discipline is never a means of conversion.⁶⁶ Again, there appears to be a logical force to this argument. But if it were true, then the church should not excommunicate anyone. Or, more specifically, we should never see excommunication as a means of the recovery of the individual who is being declared by that censure a non-Christian. When a communing member is excommunicated, we are not simply saying he is backslidden, the church is declaring him to be apostate and judicially hands him over to Satan, yet with mercy in mind too (1 Cor. 5:4–5; 1 Tim. 1:20).

With this understanding Dabney asks, if the Spirit may use discipline to recover a backsliding believer (and we could add the recovery of an apostate professing believer), why could he not use the church’s discipline to awaken a delinquent baptized member.⁶⁷ Calvin, while not explicitly referring to our case, notes that one of the ends of church discipline is the awakening of the one to whom it is applied: “The third purpose is that those overcome by shame for their baseness begin to repent. They who under gentler treatment would have become

more stubborn so profit by chastisement of their own evil as to be awakened when they feel the rod.”⁶⁸

The Canons of Dordt also state that “Grace is conferred through admonitions...”⁶⁹ And if this is so, may we not argue from the lesser to the greater that this could be said not only of admonition but of the whole disciplinary process of the church, including the suspension and excommunication of the offender? I believe we can and that this is of immense importance because the whole disciplinary process of the church is then a spiritual privilege granted to the baptized member, and if the church denies its application, it robs them of a great covenant mercy in failing to employ a means that may be used by God to bring them to repentance.

5. THE NATURE AND SUBJECTS OF EXCOMMUNICATION.

We have learned that the debate frequently hinges on a broader or narrower view of excommunication. Does this only apply to communing members and refer to the Lord’s Supper? Or does it refer to all members of the church and the removal from the communion of saints in the visible church.

We contend that Scripture supports the latter because in the first place, *baptized members are members of the church*. In the end this is what the debate is about. Do our children belong to the church? Are they members of the church? Are they under her authority? The Bible answers yes to all these questions.

Secondly, *baptized members are in the covenant*: they are included in its promise and are marked by its sign and seal. We are warranted with the Apostle Paul to view them as federally holy (1 Cor. 7:14), distinct from and therefore not of the world.⁷⁰

65. Thornwell, 4.328. Wallace, “*The Bond of Union*,” 603. Wallace points out the inconsistency of Thornwell’s reasoning at this point, saying, “Excommunication, for Thornwell, was not really discipline at all, but the declaration that discipline had failed.”

66. Thornwell, 4.329.

67. Dabney, *Discussions*, Vol. 2, 390.

68. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 2. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 4:12:5, p. 1233. He goes on to refer this to 2 Thessalonians 3:14 and 1 Corinthians 5:5.

69. Canons of Dordrecht, Third and fourth head, article 17, in *Three Forms of Unity and Ecumenical Creeds* (Mission Committee of the Protestant Reformed Churches of North America, 1999), 63.

70. Thornwell speaks starkly of the status of baptized members that they are “in the Church but of the world.” In relation to them being of the world he continues, “As of the world, they are included in the universal sentence of exclusion which bars the communion of saints against the impenitent and profane.” See *Collected Writings*, 4.347. This appears to be Thornwell’s default assumption of the spiritual status of non-communing members and baptized children. His Covenant

Thirdly, *baptized members can break that covenant of which they are members*. This was clearly the case in the Old Testament when something concrete was broken (Gen. 17:14). The book of Hebrews makes plain that covenant breaking remains a reality for baptized members of the New Testament church and warns that the consequences in the present dispensation are even more severe than the former (Heb. 3:7–4:7; 10:26–31).

In the fourth place, *this covenant breaking in the Old Testament was sanctioned with excommunication*, “That soul shall be cut off from my people” (Gen. 17:14). This happened in the case of Ishmael when he mocked Isaac the child of the covenant (Gen. 21:9–12). It happened again when Esau despised his birthright and was cut out of the spiritual inheritance of Israel (Gen. 25, 27).

Furthermore, *excommunication functions in the same way in the New Testament* where it is not simply losing the privilege of the Lord’s Table for an indefinite period of time, but being cast out of the people of God and judicially given the status of the heathen man and publican (Matt. 18:17).

Now all these things are not merely applicable to communicant members but to all members of the church. The baptized member, while he may not have communed with Christ at the Lord’s Table, has communed with Christ outwardly in the means of grace. In Jesus’ picture of the true vine in John 15 he is one of the branches externally connected to Him but perhaps void of that vital union of life. According to Hebrews 6:4–8, he has been in some sense enlightened, tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come. He may even be said to be in an outward sense *sanctified* or set apart by the blood of Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:29). He cannot excommunicate himself from this ecclesiastical communion because Christ put the keys of the kingdom in the hand of elders; they open and shut. Therefore, a delinquent baptized member should be subject to the formal discipline of the church up to and including the censure of excommunication.

Many of the church’s children have testified to the weight of these truths in their own lives. The thought of their covenant privilege and the fearful reality of covenant breaking were prominent in their own spiritual experience. Such truths weighed heavily on them and they knew it would be worse for them than for Sodom in the day of judgment if they rejected these blessings.

Theology certainly seems to take him toward a more Baptist view than an historical Reformed view of the Church and her children.

71. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia 1789), 175.

72. *Revised Book of Discipline*, 25.

What we are dealing with here is baptized members throwing all such privilege away like trash—and will the church not act? Will she not warn? Will she not bring the sanctions of God’s covenant administration in this world to bear on such members? Oh that she would, and that it would be blessed to the good of many souls.

II. PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE DISCIPLINE OF BAPTIZED MEMBERS

Having established this principle, we proceed to the second main part of this article to deal with some practical questions of how discipline might be implemented, at what age formal process should become relevant, and for what judicial discipline might be instigated.

BAPTIZED MEMBERS AND THE DISCIPLINE OF INSTRUCTION

The cases that arise in our kirk sessions concern the process of judicial discipline. To address these properly however, we must see them in the broader context of biblical discipline.

The 1789 book of discipline of the Presbyterian Church in the United States stated, “All baptized persons are members of the church, are under its care, and subject to its government and discipline; and when they have arrived at the years of discretion, they are bound to perform all the duties of church members.”⁷¹ The proposed revision to the book of order in 1857 intended to replace this with:

All baptized persons, being members of the church, are under its government and training, and when they have arrived at years of discretion, they are bound to perform all the duties of members. Only those, however, who have made a profession of faith in Christ, are proper subjects of judicial prosecution.⁷²

In changing the word *discipline* to *training*, the revision proposed to reduce the whole discipline of baptized members to this. While we believe this intention was misguided, the suggestion does highlight the vital point that training is a fundamental component of discipline. The English word *discipline* is found only once in the Authorized Version of the Bible, in Job 36:10. “He openeth also their ear to discipline, and commandeth that they return from iniquity.” It translates the Hebrew word מוֹסֵר and, of its fifty occurrences in the Old Testament, it is rendered “instruction” thirty times. The word is derived from a verb (סָרַ) meaning to chasten,

admonish or instruct, and is one of a group of words in Old Testament wisdom literature that concern instruction and correction. It is translated “instruction” twice in Proverbs 1:1–3:

The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel; To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding; To receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity.

The English word *discipline* reflects this broader meaning as it is derived from the Latin *disciplina*, meaning *instruction*. This is linked in turn to the word *discipulus*—a disciple or a learner by instruction. The same thought is conveyed in the Greek word μαθητης, which is translated “disciple” in the New Testament, where a disciple is one who has been baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and who is under the whole instruction of the church. Jesus says, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations,” or literally *make disciples of* (μαθητευω) all nations, “baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you...” (Matt. 28:19–20). Then, concerning the whole training and discipline of children, parents are commanded to bring their children up in the “nurture (παιδεια) and admonition of the Lord,” (Eph. 6:4), where instruction and correction are conspicuously joined together.

All the above terms help us to understand the biblical concept of discipline and therefore, long before we get to any judicial process, a foundation of instruction must be laid as the proper context in which this may function. If the church would be biblical in its approach to discipline, she must be faithful in the following three areas of instruction of its baptized members.

BAPTIZED MEMBERS MUST BE BROUGHT UP IN THE CONTEXT OF COVENANTAL INSTRUCTION

In the Reformation period, as the church moved away from the medieval sacramental system which employed baptism and confirmation as means of conveying grace *ex opere operata*,⁷³ the Reformers emphasised the implication of baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, and the covenant privilege of instruction of the baptized member in and by the church. The largest section of the 1812 committee report to the U.S. Presbyterian Church General Assembly is devoted to the church’s duty to instruct baptized members as the first element of that discipline. It notes that the Reformed

churches of Bohemia, France, Holland, and Scotland required that schools be set up under the oversight of the eldership in every congregation, before appealing to the Synod of Dort, who decreed that a threefold method of catechising should be observed. The first, called “domestic,” was to be performed by the parents. The second was “scholastic” and was the responsibility of the schoolmaster. The third was “ecclesiastic” and was the duty of the pastor and elders of the church.⁷⁴ They were to be the instructors of baptized children in connection with and in addition to their parents. As they exercised this responsibility, the children of the church would receive instruction and develop a relationship with their church officers—they would be “accustomed to their company and trained up under their eye.”⁷⁵ In other words, the pastor and elders would get to know and be known by the baptized members of the church in the process of instruction.

Around the same time as the 1812 report, there were various other discussions and Acts of the General Assembly with a direct bearing on the instruction of baptized youth. In 1809, the Assembly resolved that inquiry be made by presbyteries of all sessions within their bounds:

Whether a proper pastoral care be exercised over baptized children in their congregations, that they learn the principles of religion, and walk in newness of life before God; and that said Presbyteries do direct all sessions that are delinquent in this respect, to attend to it carefully and without delay.⁷⁶

In 1816 Assembly recommendations were sent down to local congregations that they each establish a Bible class for the youth. A detailed course of instruction including Bible recitation, doctrinal instruction and principles of worship was supplied. This Bible class was to be in addition to the catechetical instruction referred to earlier.⁷⁷

73. *Ex opere operata*: “by the work performed.” It refers to the medieval scholastic and Roman Catholic view that the correct performance of the sacraments by the church conveys grace to the recipient, unless he places an obstacle in the way of that grace.

74. Romeyn, “The Duty of the Church,” 40.

75. Romeyn, 51. This principle would agree with Paul’s counsel to the Thessalonians “And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. And be at peace among yourselves” (1 Thess. 5:12–13).

76. *A Digest Compiled from the Records of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and from the Records of the Late Synod of New York and Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: R. P. McCullough 1820), 78.

77. *A Digest*, 108–111.

Two years later, the Assembly of 1818 resolved that in each congregation the privileges and responsibilities of baptized members should be regularly explained to them:

Resolved, the General Assembly recommend, and they do hereby recommend to the pastors and sessions of the different churches under their care, to assemble as often as they may deem necessary during the year, the baptized children with their parents, to recommend said children in prayer to God, explain to them the nature and obligations of their baptism, and the relation which they sustain to the church.⁷⁸

All these recommendations should be strongly considered by presbyteries and kirk sessions today, and with part of this biblical, catechetical, and covenantal instruction being focused on “the relation which they sustain to the Church,” they should be informed that their membership of the church implies that they are under her judicial discipline. This would leave all in no doubt, without excuse, and indeed with the expectation that the session has the authority and will use it to instigate formal process against them as members of the church, if so required.⁷⁹

BAPTIZED MEMBERS MUST BE BROUGHT UP IN THE CONTEXT OF DISCRIMINATORY PREACHING.

It should go without saying that all baptized members should be present from their earliest days, with all other members of the church, in the appointed worship services. They ought not be separated from the congregation into their own “children’s church” while God is speaking to His church in the public preaching of the Word. Furthermore, as they are present, they should be addressed from the pulpit by the pastor in the sermon

as a specific group of hearers. Paul’s writing suggests a model of this as he addresses husbands, wives, parents, children, servants and masters, with the particular requirements of the Word of God to them (Eph. 5:22–6:9). Then, beyond addressing them directly in the sermon, pastors should be conscious of all baptized members in their pulpit preparation and pitch sermons at a level so that as many of them can glean as much as possible from their youngest years. His task is to communicate God’s truth and to feed Christ’s sheep, including the lambs of the flock.

The members of the visible church being addressed by the Word of God are a mixed group of hearers. Not every member is united to Christ by true faith and therefore we do not presume our baptized members are regenerated. They need the whole Word of God, as it relates to their whole person and life, and so it is vital that the preaching is discriminatory and applicatory. This will serve as the first level of ecclesiastical discipline. Joel Beeke describes this kind of preaching:

Discriminatory preaching defines the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian. Discriminatory preaching is the key by which the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and shut against unbelievers.⁸⁰

Such preaching will discriminate between Christian virtue and counterfeit fruit, between the healthy Christian and those who are backslidden in heart. It will strengthen true hope and shatter false confidence. Beeke defines applicatory preaching as that which “applies the text to every aspect of the hearer’s life and spiritual need. In this way it seeks to promote a religion that’s truly a power, not a mere form (2 Tim. 3:5).”⁸¹ When baptized members are exposed to this kind of ministry, they will be confronted with the law and the gospel. They will be addressed with evangelistic preaching in calls to repent and believe in Christ freely offered to them, as well as with summons to Christian discipleship. They will be confronted with the obligations of the covenant, encouraged with its precious promises and pressed with their calling to bear the reproach of Christ in the world, as those who have given their names up to him in baptism.⁸² Fearful warnings will also be given to them against despoising their privileges and of apostasy from the Lord.

Ministers of the gospel should be conscious of their need to so discriminate with and apply God’s Word in their preaching, and the other elders in the session must employ their authority to ensure that this

78. *A Digest*, 111.

79. This agrees with the teaching of Bucer’s Catechism referred to earlier. After teaching them that the keys of the kingdom are in the hands of church officers and are used “(a) To warn against and punish sins, to bind and excommunicate those who refuse to repent; (b) to loose and in grace receive those who desire to repent,” he asks the child: “*What am I to learn from this?*” Answer: (a) To readily allow myself to be warned and punished; (b) to readily warn my neighbour; (c) to value highly, and diligently make use of church discipline and comfort. W. Van’t Spijker, “De Tucht over Doopleden,” citing translation by L. W. Bilkes.

80. Joel Beeke and Ray Lanning, “The Transforming Power Of Scripture,” in *Sola Scriptura, The Protestant Position on the Bible*, ed. Don Kistler (Reformation Trust, 2009), 126.

81. Beeke and Lanning, 127.

82. Larger Catechism Question 167. In *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Free Presbyterian, Glasgow, 2003), 257–258.

is taking place in the pulpit by holding the minister to his task.

BAPTIZED MEMBERS MUST BE BROUGHT UP IN THE
CONTEXT OF PASTORAL VISITATION

Baptized members are among the people of the Lord's pasture and the "sheep of his hand," Psalm. 95:7. This Psalm is taken up in the New Testament and applied to the church in Hebrews 3–4, whose members are warned not to do what Israel did in the wilderness in the days of Moses. As members of the Lord's flock, Christ's under-shepherds are therefore to tend to all baptized members in the exercise of their pastoral care.

The 1812 report calls this "one of the principal means of disciplining our baptized members,"⁸³ and quotes the whole of the 1708 Act of the Church of Scotland General Assembly anent pastoral visitation. That Act stipulated that the minister was to visit the homes of members of the congregation, going with the elder who was appointed over that parish district. After acquainting themselves with the needs of the family, they would prayerfully go for an arranged visit. The Act provides substantial direction in thirteen points, with the seventh concerning children in the home:

The minister is to apply his discourse to the children, as they are capable, with affectionate seriousness; showing them the advantages of knowing, loving, seeking, and serving God, and remembering their Creator and Redeemer in the days of their youth, and honouring their parents; and to remember how they are dedicated to God in baptism; and when of age, and fit, and after due instruction of the nature of the Covenant of Grace, and seals thereof, to excite them to engage themselves personally to the Lord, and to desire, and pray for, and take the first opportunity they can of partaking of the Lord's Supper; to be specially careful how they communicate at first . . . exciting them also to daily reading of the Scriptures and to secret prayer and sanctifying of the Lord's day.⁸⁴

In summary then, the judicial discipline of baptized members is to be built upon and to function within the context of thorough teaching. There is to be covenant instruction and catechism training by the elders in the church as well as pastoral visitation and counsel administered in the home. Discriminatory and applicatory preaching from the pulpit should take place at the heart of it all. In this way, the baptized member will grow up knowing they were being addressed, instructed, watched

for, prayed for and loved by the pastor and elders of the church. In the event of discipline, they will not only know certain things about discipline, but they will know and be known by the people disciplining them.

BAPTIZED MEMBERS AND THE DISCIPLINE OF CENSURE

The conclusion of the 1812 Committee report proposed that baptized members who come to years and do not profess their faith in Christ should be excommunicated for this failure of unbelief. This was deemed consistent with the 1789 Book of Discipline that stated, "they are bound to perform all the duties of church members."⁸⁵ As it is the chief duty of baptized members to believe in Christ, their failure to do so was considered censurable. It is our conviction that this conclusion lacks an important degree of nuance, and vital Scriptural support. We will elaborate as we examine the issue of what baptized members should and should not be judicially disciplined for.

Before we get into specific details, we need to clarify two things in connection with church censure. The first is to refresh our understanding of church membership. Church membership, as sealed by Christian baptism, is a recognition that a person is in the administration of God's covenant of grace. Baptism distinguishes them from the world, engages them to Christ and His service; it marks the boundaries of the visible church, but it does not automatically entitle the baptized person to all the benefits of church membership. The second is excommunication, which is the public censure that recognizes the covenant of grace sealed in baptism has been renounced, and the person is being cut off from the church by Christ's appointed ecclesiastical government. Bearing these two things in mind, the question of judicial discipline will be viewed in connection with what constitutes a violation or a renunciation of this covenant, which can be done in relation to profession of faith or moral scandal.

THE DISCIPLINE OF BAPTIZED MEMBERS FOR UNBELIEF

The kind of unbelief we refer to here is not that of a baptized person who grows to adulthood in the church but cannot say that he knows he has believed to the

83. Romeyn, "The Duty of the Church," 40.

84. *An Abridgment of the Acts of the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland from the year 1638 to 1810 Inclusive* (Edinburgh, Abernethy and Walker, 1811), 344.

85. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia 1789), 175.

saving of the soul i.e. one who does not have the kind of profession of faith that will bring him to the Lord's Table.⁸⁶ The presence of such members may appear to complicate church life somewhat or bring a degree of confusion into someone's understanding of covenant theology, but there is nothing in scripture by precept or example to suggest that such baptized members should be excommunicated. In the Word of God, they are still included among the covenant people of God. There is no precedent in the Old Testament for someone who was circumcised, growing up and being excommunicated because he was not able to say he knew he was circumcised in heart. Nor is there such a case in the New Testament of a baptized person being put out of the church for not being assured of his interest in Christ or having knowledge that he was born again.

This brings us to an intimately related matter: what constitutes a profession of faith? It is a question that the Reformed have historically wrestled with, and it is important to any who subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Confession understands the nature of the visible church in relation to this:

The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of *all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children*: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.⁸⁷

86. Reformed churches have not agreed on what constitutes a profession of faith required for participation at the Lord's Table. Some have looked for an objective confession of the truth of the Christian religion that is uncontradicted by the person's life. Others have sought a subjective confession of personal regeneration. A middle position between these two extremes, and which in the author's opinion is the most biblical, is to require confession of the truth of the Christian religion together with a profession of heart willingness to rest on Christ, to count the cost of Christian discipleship and submit to Christ as Lord.

87. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Johnston and Hunter, 1855), 107–108.

88. A change takes place over this question in American Presbyterianism in the eighteenth century as a fall out from the "Halfway Covenant" dispute among the New England Congregational Churches. As a result of this, covenant theology appears to have become more predominantly viewed in relation to personal conversion and a sensitivity to its corporate aspects was diminished.

89. This was another issue in the Book of Discipline Controversy—the proposed revision advised they should be simply removed from the roll.

90. This thought concerning degrees in the sin of apostasy was gleaned in discussion with Rev. Michael Spangler, and I am thankful for his insight.

Who then are "all those that profess the true religion"? Are they only those who know they are born again? Or only those who come to the Lord's Table? Do people who do not have the confidence to come to the Table, not profess the true religion in any way? Are they to be viewed as outside the visible church? Historically, the majority of the Reformed have answered that those who profess the true religion, and assent to the faith confessed by the church, and remain within her, should be counted as baptized members.⁸⁸ Remember that baptism does not entitle one to all the benefits of church membership: they will not come to the Lord's Table, but they remain in the church, and if they have children and are bringing them up in the church, they will have them baptized. In relation to unbelief they will remain members until such times as they renounce their baptism and God's covenant by professing anything other than the true religion.

So, a denial of Christianity in any of its cardinal truths would constitute a disciplinary offence. If someone were to deny the Trinity, reject the incarnation or engage in idolatry, this would be demonstrable unbelief that should be censured by the church as a renunciation of the truth of the gospel sealed to him in baptism. It is not sufficient to remove his name from the roll of baptized members,⁸⁹ he is in the act of apostatising from the truth and the church should warn, instruct, reason, and plead with him and, if he does not amend, then judicially excommunicate him because apostasy against Christ before partaking of the Lord's Supper is the same sin in kind, but not degree, as apostasy after partaking of the Lord's Supper.⁹⁰

Others who maintain this outward profession of faith and remain in the church should be probed, pastored and disciplined under the discriminatory preaching of the Word. They should be warned that the church is mixed and if they do not have true faith, they will perish among the chaff or with the foolish virgins in the day of the Lord (Matt. 3:12; 25:1–13). At the same time, they should be encouraged and drawn to hope in Christ if it is a lack of assurance of faith they wrestle with. Someone may object to this—but if they do not believe in Christ, then they have broken God's covenant and should therefore be disciplined. In response, we would say that God does not require the church to censure all sin, and especially heart sin. Adultery manifest in the life is censurable, but adultery in the heart is not. So there is an unbelief that the Lord will censure Himself, which He does not put into the hand of the church, but tells us that the wheat and tares will grow together until the end (Matt. 13:24–30). Then there is a form of

demonstrable unbelief that the Lord requires the church to act against, when someone renounces their baptism by denial of the true religion or apostasy from truth.

THE DISCIPLINE OF BAPTIZED MEMBERS
FOR MORAL SCANDAL

Cases of moral scandal predominate in the scriptural examples of ecclesiastical discipline. In Deuteronomy 21:17–22, the incorrigible youth was cut off from the people of God for his open rebellion against God’s Law and refusal to submit to the authority of his parents and amend his ways. Other Old Testament examples show discipline was to be administered for profaning worship; for sexual sins; despising the Word of the Lord and profaning the Sabbath (Lev. 18–19, Lev. 20, Num. 15:23–36).

The best-known case of discipline in the New Testament is recorded in 1 Corinthians 5, where there was an incestuous relationship between a man and his stepmother. Paul required the guilty member to be put out of the congregation (v 13), by judicially handing him over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh and for his salvation (v 5). This was to be done in the knowledge that unchecked sin would spread in the church, “a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (v 6). In this case, fornication was a disciplinary offence, but he goes on to call for the same censure against “covetous, extortioners, idolaters” (v 10), including “railers” and “drunkards” (v 11).⁹¹

There should be no question that a communicant member should be disciplined for such moral scandals, but this equally applies to baptized members whose baptism obligates them to live a life of covenant obedience to God, as much as a communicant member. God says to every baptized person what He said to Abraham, “Walk before me and be thou perfect” (Gen. 17:1), and so the church is not to tolerate scandal in a baptized member’s life any more than she will tolerate it in the life of her communing members. There is one baptism (Eph. 4:5), calling all baptized to one standard of holy living, by which all members are to be disciplined. Failure to discipline baptized members in this way has led to churches being filled with hypocrites. People grow up in the church and then go off and live as they please. No discipline is applied and they later think that they can come back to present their children for baptism.

There is also the scandal occasioned by a person’s contumacy against the authority of church courts.⁹² Jesus addressed this in Matthew 18:15–18, where He described the process of discipline from private rebuke to public excommunication. If the person refuses to repent

and finally rejects church authority, Jesus calls for them to be put out of it. “If he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” (Matt. 18:17). This is the language of excommunication, and the church clearly has an authority to bind such by their decision, which brings us back to what we said about excommunication: it is the judicial removal of someone from the church and the public declaration that the covenant of grace sealed in baptism has been renounced, so that they are no longer to be regarded as a church member. In this case the evidence of apostasy is their rejection of the ecclesiastical authority Christ appointed in His church when they are doing what He requires them to do. They are not merely opposing men but setting themselves up as an enemy of Christ and rejecting God’s covenant by refusing Christ in the government of His church.

With all that we have considered here on disciplinable offences, let us inquire again into the case of someone who cannot say he has the faith to come to the Lord’s Table, but he remains orthodox in his understanding, upright in his life and diligent upon the means of grace. He continues within the gates of Zion, brings his family up in the church and is free of doctrinal and moral scandal. It would appear to be ecclesiastical cruelty to treat such a baptized member of the church in the same way that we would treat those who outwardly deny the faith by rejection of the truth, or by scandalous sin in the life, or by rebellion against the government Christ appointed in the church. In this connection, the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church in America gives wise counsel and specifies that adult non-communicant members should not be excommunicated for their non-profession:

Adult non-communicating members, who receive with meekness and appreciation the oversight and instruction of the Church, are entitled to special attention. Their rights and privileges under the covenant should be frequently and fully explained, and they should be warned of the sin and danger of neglecting their covenant obligations.⁹³

91. Paul’s list of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and other similar passages, are also helpful for direction in discipline, such as for example, Galatians 5:19–21.

92. Contumacy is the stubborn refusal to comply with authority, in this case the courts of the church.

93. *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 6th Edition, 28–4 (Lawrenceville, GA. 2009), www.pcahistory.org (accessed 4 April 2019).

BAPTIZED MEMBERS AND THE DISCIPLINARY PROCESS

We have provided the overall context for the discipline of baptized members in the covenantal instruction, discriminatory preaching, and close pastoral care of the church. After this we examined what should constitute a disciplinary offence. This leaves us to consider some practical matters toward a form of process that may be followed in administering discipline to baptized members.

WHEN SHOULD THE DISCIPLINARY PROCESS START?

An obvious practical question is what age a baptized member might become liable to formal church discipline. We noted earlier that Walter Steuart of Pardovan, writing in the early eighteenth century, observed that boys from the age of fourteen and girls from the age of twelve could be charged before the courts of the church.⁹⁴ In the society of that time, this agreed with the respective ages that boys and girls were deemed to have come out of their minority and moved into adulthood. These were also the ages at which it was legal for males and females to marry in medieval and early modern Scotland. To translate this into contemporary society, the legal age to marry ranges in most Western nations between sixteen and eighteen years old.

There is evidence that the Reformed churches have always been sensitive to this issue of minority in relation to church discipline, so that parental authority and discipline were not usurped by the church. John à Lasco's order for the Dutch refugee church in London, in the sixteenth century, is an example of this, and its form of process commends itself to us.⁹⁵

The church would begin its formal disciplinary role when the member was around fourteen years old, i.e. just coming out of their minority but still related to the authority and care of the parent. From this time until the age of eighteen to twenty, direct admonition would be given to the member along with encouragement and comfort to faithful parents. The baptized member was liable to suspension from the privilege of the Lord's Table at this age, but over the age of eighteen, when the person was in their clear adult majority, if all correction

had been refused, they were to be excommunicated from the church.

The 1925 procedure of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken also has a number of helpful points. Discipline was to be applied in different ways at different ages: under the age of sixteen the member should only be admonished, rebuked and exhorted alongside their parents. They become subject to the formal discipline when over the age of sixteen and are not to be removed from membership without it. If they continue in sin over the age of twenty-one they should be removed from the church by formal process. While it is expected that by the age of twenty-one a profession of faith will have been made, the form is careful to distinguish between those who are careless in sin and those who remain faithful in the church but do not have liberty to confess their personal faith.⁹⁶ The steps in the procedure are: first, serious admonition to the baptized member. If there is no remedy, then an announcement is made to the congregation without identifying the person by name, while asking the congregation to pray. If there is still no remedy, a further announcement is made in which the offender is publicly named. After this step, the person is declared to be no longer a member of the church. Between each step, the person is repeatedly exhorted and admonished by the pastors and elders to repent. When the Synod adopted their form of process, they also made provision for the repentance and return of the person who had been excluded:

Members by Baptism who have been excluded from the Church, and who later repent of their sin, shall be received again into the Church, after a period of probation, followed by public confession of their guilt and profession of faith.⁹⁷

HOW SHOULD THE DISCIPLINARY PROCESS PROCEED?

Taking the above discussion into consideration, the general steps and rules of church disciplinary procedure should be followed both for communing and non-communicating members of the church. When required, each should receive pastoral admonition; citation to appear before the session; charges should be brought and evidence processed in connection with the charge; and if necessary, they may be censured and excommunicated. However, a few specific differences should be considered in relation to a non-communicant status.

The first is that the censure of suspension from the Lord's Table will not be available in the case of a baptized member. As he is a non-communicant, he has

94. Walter Steuart Pardovan, *Collections and Observations Concerning the Worship, Discipline and Government of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: W. Gray, 1770), 215. See prior quotation.

95. See the prior quotation at footnote 10.

96. Pieter VanderMeyden, "Church Discipline of Baptized Members," *Officebearers Journal*, Vol. 1 (Spring 2018): 27–29.

97. VanderMeyden, 29.

not yet been granted this privilege. This censure of suspension is usually referred to as the lesser excommunication, and serious thought should be given to it in the case of a baptized member, because, if this step is skipped, then the process to the greater excommunication is significantly shortened. As the church is to mix mercy with judgment and to bear patiently with her members in seeking to recover them from their sin, to give space for repentance, consideration should be given as to how this can be done in the case of baptized members.

It is helpful here to contemplate what we mean by the “lesser excommunication.” As it applies to a communicant member, this is not only their suspension from the Lord’s Table, but also the removal of other privileges of membership, such as the right to have their children baptized, or the right to vote in the election of office-bearers. Baptized members also enjoy some of these privileges, and so the lesser excommunication for them could be the revocation of these rights. For instance, the right to have their children baptized for a stated period of time, in which the church looks for repentance and reformation of life. The suspension could be announced to the congregation with an exhortation to prayer, and the case could be reviewed at the end of the stated period, and either the lesser excommunication renewed for another period, or the greater excommunication applied. The significant thing to note here is that a form of the lesser excommunication may be applied to a baptized member.

Another area for particular consideration is the way a baptized member is exhorted by the session throughout the disciplinary process. Arguments and appeals made to a baptized member will be specific to their non-communicating status. They will not be spoken to about a removal from the Lord’s Table, but they may be exhorted about their neglect of present and future privileges— when they should be giving diligence to make their calling and election sure, and laying hold of the privilege of the Table, they are closing the door against themselves. They might also be addressed on the solemnity of rejecting God’s covenant and the danger of taking their children out of this with them. Not only would their own blood be on their hands but the blood of their children, and children’s children likewise.

What we are proposing then would look like this: Baptized members are to be brought up in the church in the context of covenantal instruction, discriminatory preaching and pastoral care. Under the age of sixteen, the session would exhort and admonish for delinquent behavior in support of the parents. At the age of sixteen,

the baptized member would become liable to the formal judicial process of the church in the following steps.

1. Summons to appear before the kirk session.
2. Charge concerning scandal.
3. If guilt is established, the lesser excommunication would be applied in a period of suspension from the privileges of church membership they already enjoy. This suspension would be announced to the congregation and their prayers solicited.
4. The Session reviews the case at the end of the stated period of suspension, and either proceeds with a renewal of the suspension, or escalates it to the greater excommunication, with the relevant pronouncement made in the congregation, and prayers offered.
5. If the sentence of the greater excommunication is passed, the person should be declared to be no longer a member of the visible church.
6. At each step in the process, the baptized member should be counselled, exhorted to repentance, and prayed for by the session.

The whole process has as its motive the glory of God and the good of the souls of baptized members. “For my brethren and companions’ sakes, I will now say, Peace be within thee. Because of the house of the LORD our God I will seek thy good” (Ps. 122:8–9).■