A BOOK REVIEW OF “DEMOCRATIC RELIGION: FREEDOM, AUTHORITY AND CHURCH DISCIPLINE IN THE BAPTIST SOUTH 1785-1900” BY GREGORY A. WILLS.

Aaron P. Swain

Wake Forest, NC

March 14, 2013
Democratic Religion is an historical analysis of how Baptists in the South understood and practiced the concepts of religious freedom and ecclesiastical authority. With religious freedom, Baptist churches maintained that they had the right to believe as their consciences and the Word of God dictated. With ecclesiastical authority, Baptist churches reserved the right to discipline its members for immoral action or heretical doctrine. These dual concepts, though seemingly at odds with one another, were most evidently expressed in the practice of church discipline. In eight chapters spanning 180 pages, Gregory Wills surveys how Baptists, more than any other denomination, were once known for their commitment to church discipline and how they then all but abandoned the practice by the turn of the 20th century. As Wills put it, “This is the story of how one denomination fashioned a form of piety at once committed to religious freedom and to democratic authority” (4).

Chapter one, Democratic Exclusivism, documents how Baptists in the South viewed the practice of excommunicating wayward sinners by way of church discipline was necessary in order to mark their separation from the world. According to Wills, to Baptists “both the preaching of the gospel and the exercise of church discipline served the vision of the pure church by separating the righteous from the unrighteous” (17). These acts of excommunication would take place at regularly scheduled conference meetings. It was there that public accusations could be made against church members, where the accused could publically repent, and where the church could democratically decide to forgive or to excommunicate the accused.

The second chapter, Democracies Primitive and Pure, examines more closely why Baptists practiced church discipline. Wills gives accounts of Baptist churches disciplining
activity such as dancing and fiddling, as well as “Sabbath breaking, partiality, worldliness, and gossiping” (27). The purity of the churches was always the goal, and the means to that purity was patterning each Baptist church after the polity of the early (or, primitive) church. Church discipline and the subsequent purity that resulted was believed to be “the source of spiritual revival” (33). On the other hand, Baptists viewed a lack of discipline as spiritually detrimental. As J.L. Dagg said, “When discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it” (33).

Democratic Authority is the next chapter. It describes in detail each step of the discipline process, and more specifically, the significant authority that each local church exercised in each of those steps. Wills notes that “Public discipline began with accusation or confession” and that “in most instances” this occurred in a “public conference” (37). These accusations could come from anyone, including women and slaves. Baptist churches were often pleased to forgive the accused, especially when he 1) confessed; 2) “acknowledged the church’s right to discipline them; and 3) “demonstrate[d] sorrow and repentance” (40). For more serious or “grave offenses” the church considered it their obligation to excommunicate despite genuine confession by the accused (41). Excommunication meant that the offender would be excluded from participating in the ordinances, holding church office, voting, and “the right to be called brother or sister” (44). Those who were excommunicated were sometimes restored. Wills summarizes the Baptists understanding of authority in this way, “To oppose the church’s discipline was to oppose the authority of God” (49).

Chapter four deals with the issues of Democracy, Race, & Gender. Here Wills examines how women and black church members participated in and received discipline. He notes that though there was no universal policy, “antebellum Baptist churches usually granted female members – and often granted slaves – voting privileges” (51). Though men were accused much
more than women, women were excommunicated “one and a half times more” than men were. Wills suggests that this disproportioned discipline happened because women were expected to be the keepers of “purity and piety” and when they failed to be pure and pious, the church reacted more swiftly (56). Similarly, blacks were excommunicated at a disproportionate rate compared to whites. Slaves also had assigned seating often in the back or the balcony of the church and sometimes requested to be able to form their own churches.

_African American Democracies_ is the fifth chapter and deals with the increase in black Baptists and black Baptist churches in the South. Here Wills gives some interesting statistics, including the fact that “black Baptists outnumbered whites 131,216 to 123,851” by the year 1883 (67). “Almost one in three African Americans in the state [of Georgia] belonged to a Baptist church” (67). Concerning church discipline, black churches practiced it more frequently than white churches and continued to do so even while discipline was declining in white churches (68). Despite the reality of segregation, blacks still “felt that their spirituality had more in common with the white Baptists than with the black pedobaptist denominations” (69). Black churches embraced believers baptism, church discipline, and Calvinistic theology just as white churches do.

_Freedom, Authority, and Doctrine_ deals with the relationship between the doctrinal distinctives of Baptists in the south and church discipline. Specifically, Wills notes that a significant number of churches in the Baptist south embraced Calvinistic theology. Upholding good doctrine was of the utmost importance because, “Loose doctrine leads to loose discipline, and loose discipline invariably results in loose practice” (85). Churches were known to read their confessions of faith, which reflected their Calvinistic theology, and church covenants out loud on a regular basis (86). Differences in essential doctrine or other important Baptist beliefs,
such as the perseverance of the saints, were grounds for excommunication.

Chapter seven addresses the Associations, Creeds, and Calvinism of Baptist churches in the South. Though each Baptist church was autonomous, they often freely cooperated in local associations and partnered together for the spread of the gospel. Sometimes the churches in an association would intervene if they believed a church was errant. Wills says that this “was a form of interchurch discipline even though associations “had no power to enforce her recommendations on the churches” (100). Associations and churches alike adopted Calvinistic confessions such as the Second London Confession and the New Hampshire Confession of faith. These confessions of faith were used as guidelines for disciplining wayward members. Wills seeks to dispel the idea that Baptists have been opposed to creeds. Instead, he argues that Baptists have opposed “religious confessions enforced by a civil government, imposed on churches by a hierarchy…” (109).

The final chapter, Democratic Religion Transformed, explains how a denomination that was once committed to church discipline became one that almost completely gave up the practice. For some, church discipline was too much trouble, especially as worldly practices like dancing became more commonplace and accepted amongst younger church members. Urban churches proved to be more tolerant and less likely to discipline (129). Wills suggests that there was a significant paradigm shift by the late 19th century where “efficiency” was the primary concern for Baptist churches instead of church purity. This lead to significantly less church discipline, because excommunication was both time consuming and would exclude members from the church that could very well be put to work in the ministry of the church. Baptist pastors ended up making statements like, “when a man is once brought into the church, he should never be excluded for any cause.” And many Baptists began to “embrace the idea that a democratic
church meant that all were equally free from ecclesiastical authority” (137). Thus, by the early 20th century, the practice of church discipline in Baptists churches was virtually non-existent.

The evidence that he produces seems to be conclusive, namely, that Baptists simultaneously promoted religious freedom and ecclesiastical authority demonstrated in a robust practice of church discipline. In writing this book, Gregory Wills has provided a seemingly exhaustive record of Baptist churches’ beliefs and practices regarding church discipline. One of the greatest strengths of the book is the numerous primary sources and quotations that Wills uses. By quoting church minutes, early Baptist newspapers, and other first-hand accounts, the reader is personally introduced to these important Baptist doctrines by those who believed them and defended them. That church discipline was one prominent and is now significantly neglected is undeniable.

Wills concludes his book by lamenting that church discipline is only rarely seen today when addressing the most vile or offensive sins. It should be noted that since the writing of Democratic Religion many have shared Wills’ concerns and the practice of church discipline is slowly becoming more commonplace amongst Southern Baptist churches. Those churches that have once again embraced church discipline are indebted to Wills for providing such an apologetic for this practice. Those churches that have not embraced church discipline would do well to read Democratic Religion and consider what Wills and the Baptists of the 19th century have to say.