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Jeremy M. Kimble

Cedarville University, jkimble@cedarville.edu

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That Their Souls May Be Saved: The Theology and Practice of Jonathan Edwards on Church Discipline

— Jeremy M. Kimble —

Jeremy Kimble is assistant professor of theology at Cedarville University in Cedarville, Ohio. He is the author of That His Spirit May Be Saved: Church Discipline as a Means to Repentance and Perseverance *(Wipf & Stock, 2013).*

Abstract: A great deal of research has been done on the life and theology of Jonathan Edwards. However, there is a dearth of interest as it pertains to Edwards’s ecclesiology. As such, while certain moments in Edwards’s ministry dealing with excommunication have been dealt with, there is a need to look not only at the cases he oversaw, but also the theology that undergirded that practice of discipline. Setting Edwards in his historical context and looking specifically at both his ecclesiology and his doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, this article demonstrates how these doctrines coincided for Edwards to form a practice of church discipline that was exacting and rigorous in relation to many of his contemporaries in whose churches discipline was largely on the decline.

Piety in early American religious life was a preeminent concern and shaped the policies and practices of early colonial life. As Bezzant notes, “The Puritan experiment in the New World was more than a Calvinist adventure in pure doctrine. At heart, it was founded on a pious vision for pure worship, which was constrained by pure congregational life.”¹ In order to maintain and preserve this kind of holy living, observance of a rigorous ecclesiastical discipline was consistently maintained. While the practice of church discipline contains both high and low points in American life, one era of special interest to examine in tracing its application and effectiveness is the Great Awakening, particularly in the ministry and context of Jonathan Edwards.²

¹Rhys Steward Bezzant, “Orderly But Not Ordinary: Jonathan Edward’s Evangelical Ecclesiology” (PhD diss., Australian College of Theology Melbourne, 2010), 1. Bezzant’s work has recently been revised and published as *Jonathan Edwards and the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). This essay cites it in prepublication form, as the author was kind enough to share the dissertation manuscript prior to the book’s publication. (Editor’s Note: See Jeremy Kimble’s review of Bezzant, *Jonathan Edwards and the Church*, in this issue of *Themelios* in the “History and Historical Theology” section.)

²For examples of more thorough studies of church discipline in early American life see James F. Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (Religion in America; New York:

Edwards, the renowned theologian and pastor of Northampton, has received a great deal of scholarly attention, and deservedly so. Often referred to as America's greatest theologian, Edwards's contributions to metaphysics, soteriology, revivalism, the Trinity, and a host of other topics, makes him a figure worthy of study. However, as Sweeney observes, "Despite his lifelong labors in pastoral ministry, Edwards' doctrine of the church has gone largely unnoticed by scholars."³ While work has been done in this area since Sweeney's publication,⁴ more specific investigations are merited, particularly in the area of church discipline. Edwards's context was unique, particularly as he found himself within a time of revival and then sought to handle matters of discipline from within that context. As such, this article demonstrates that Edwards's practice of church discipline was quite exacting and rigorous in relation to much of his historical context in which church discipline was largely on the decline. This is due to his ecclesiological and soteriological beliefs, which became more pronounced in the midst of revival.

In treating this subject, we first observe the historical context of seventeenth and eighteenth century colonial America—particularly New England—to better understand the beliefs and practices of ecclesial discipline that preceded Edwards. This gives us a better idea of how he fits within his context. We then analyze the ecclesiology of Edwards, offering a clearer picture of both his view and practice of church discipline. Finally, we note in what ways, if any, Edwards's practice of church discipline relates to his views of soteriology, specifically the perseverance of the saints.

1. Historical Context

The early settlers of New England sought to exact a fairly strict practice of church discipline,⁵ though, unlike in Calvin's Geneva, there was a separation of church and state in the enacting of disciplinary measures.⁶ Most churches in Massachusetts Bay followed similar standards for censuring their members in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In 1644, John Cotton explained that church discipline represented the "key of order." Such a key "is the power whereby every member of

Oxford University Press, 1999); Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785–1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³Douglas A. Sweeney, "The Church," in *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (Sang Hyun Lee; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 167.

⁴See, for example, Bezzant, "Orderly But Not Ordinary"; Amy Planting Pauw, "Jonathan Edwards' Ecclesiology," in *Jonathan Edwards as Contemporary: Essays in Honor of Sang Hyun Lee* (ed. Don Schweitzer; New York: Lang, 2010), 175–86; Krister Sairsingh, "Jonathan Edwards and the Idea of Divine Glory: His Foundational Trinitarianism and Its Ecclesial Import" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1986).

⁵For general discussion of church discipline and deviance leading up to and in colonial New England, see Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Kai Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (2nd ed.; Allyn & Bacon Classics; Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2005).

⁶This is generally true, though for a time in 1638 the Massachusetts General Court was encouraged to order fines, imprisonment, banishment, or further for whoever stood under excommunication for more than six months without seeking restoration. This lasted only a brief time as pastors, such as John Cotton, asserted that connecting civil power to the church would bring only corruption. See David D. Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (Harvard Theological Studies 54; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 133–36.

the Church walketh orderly himself . . . and helpeth his brethren to walk orderly also.”⁷ In 1648, Puritan minister Thomas Hooker explained the necessity of church discipline: “[God] hath appointed Church-censures as good Physick, to purge out what is evil, as well as Word and Sacraments, which, like good diet, are sufficient to nourish the soul to eternal life.”⁸ Hooker explained that church members must watch over one another, “each particular brother (appointed) as a skillful Apothecary, to help forward the spiritual health of all in confederacy with him.”⁹ Disciplinary practices helped to ensure that the Puritans stayed on their godly paths.¹⁰

Throughout the first three generations in New England, Puritans consistently emphasized discipline. However, churches could discipline only full members. During the founding years of the colonies this posed no problems, “as most everyone who made the journey across the Atlantic became members. However, as full membership declined during the second generation, congregations had to confront the growing number of residents who fell outside the power of church discipline.”¹¹ This was a distinct dilemma, since in the first generation a document in Massachusetts had been ratified (1646–1648), known as the *Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline*. Led by John Cotton, local churches adopted this treatise as a sort of ecclesiastical constitution. Regarding discipline, this document asserts,

The censures of the church are appointed by Christ for the preventing, removing, and healing of offenses in the church; for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren; for the deterring others from the like offences; for purging out the leaven which may infect the whole lump; for vindicating the honor of Christ, and of his Church, and the whole profession of the gospel; and for preventing the wrath of God.¹²

Thus, according to the *Cambridge Platform*, ministerial responsibilities included examining candidates for membership, receiving “accusations brought to the Church,” preparing disciplinary cases, and pronouncing “sentence with the consent of the Church.”¹³

⁷ John Cotton, *The Keyes to the Kingdom of Heaven* (London: Simmons, 1644), 87.

⁸ Thomas Hooker, *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline* (London: Kessinger, 2007), 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ This section derives from Monica D. Fitzgerald, “Drunkards, Fornicators and a Great Hen Squabble: Censure Practices and the Gendering of Puritanism,” *Church History* 80, no. 1 (2011): 41–42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹² *The Cambridge and Saybrook Platforms of Church Discipline, with the Confession of Faith of the New England Churches, Adopted in 1680; and the Heads of Agreement Assented to by the Presbyterians and Congregationalists in England in 1690* (Boston: Marvin, 1829), 54–55. For helpful background on the Cambridge Platform, see Hall, *The Faithful Shepherd*, 93–120.

¹³ Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 25. Fitzgerald (“Drunkards, Fornicators and a Great Hen Squabble,” 46–47) notes, “Congregations censured men and women for a wide variety of sinful behaviors. This included: dishonoring the Sabbath, child or spousal abuse, lack of deference, immodesty, absence from church, stealing, false witness, cursing, contempt for church, idleness, witchcraft, entertaining sin, lying, fornication, and drunkenness. Censure represented the only judgment or punishment Puritans could instigate against one another within the church; they could not fine, jail or execute a sinner. An accused sinner could be found innocent, forgiven, admonished, suspended from the Lord’s Supper, or excommunicated. An admonishment, suspension, or excommunication would hang over the sinner until the congregation determined that the sinner had adequately confessed and repented.”

First and second generation Puritan ministers emphasized the importance of church discipline for maintaining a holy community. If the church did not recover or “purge out” the sinner, he could “infect” the whole community, whence God could send his wrath down on the town in judgment. “Maintaining social order was critical for a godly community, and ministers argued that every Puritan had a responsibility for personal piety and public duty.”¹⁴ Thus church discipline was not the sole domain of pastors. Every stage of the disciplinary process depended heavily upon lay participation. Disciplinary measures in churches revolved around a system of lay “collective watchfulness,” where members of the congregation agreed to oversee the moral behavior of fellow congregants, resulting in the enactment of discipline if necessary.¹⁵ “Failure to exercise ‘watch’ over a fellow churchgoer represented breach of covenant—itsself a grave, punishable violation—with the wayward sheep, whose soul stood in danger, and with the church, which stood to suffer corruption should sin seep in undetected and remain unpunished.”¹⁶ This procedure, followed by the lay people, was an application of their understanding of Matt 18.

However, by the end of the seventeenth century, a gradual decline in the practice of church discipline was evident.¹⁷ “Many churches exercised church discipline only in the most obvious of cases in the 1720s and 1730s, a development that in part reflected a decline in commitment to mutual watch.”¹⁸ Part of this decline in rigorous discipline may be attributed to the adoption of the Halfway Covenant by a number of New England congregations, particularly Solomon Stoddard, Edwards’s grandfather. This covenant allowed the children of full members who had not experienced conversion to enjoy partial church membership.¹⁹ Under this covenant all halfway members assumed the benefits and responsibilities of mutual watchfulness incumbent upon those engaged in church covenant, but did not enjoy the privileges of voting or participation in the Lord’s Supper—though Stoddard later retracted this restriction and allowed halfway members to participate in communion as a “converting ordinance”—until they experienced conversion and became full members. “Hailed as a perfect compromise, the

¹⁴ Fitzgerald, “Drunkards, Fornicators and a Great Hen Squabble,” 46.

¹⁵ So Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 127, who notes, “Just as concern for the offender’s soul outweighed a desire for punishment in disciplinary decisions, so the maintenance of church purity still superseded the members’ heightened concern with individual privacy or ‘reputation.’ Church discipline maintained its unique status as the only institution that in public assembly probed into the most personal details of a member’s life.”

¹⁶ Ibid., 36. See also Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), 221.

¹⁷ So Rhys Bezzant, “Ordered Ecclesiastical Life,” unpublished paper (sent via email in January 2012), 2: “From the end of the seventeenth century, the practice of excommunication was severely challenged. The establishment of the Dominion of New England after 1684 with more intrusive royal control, and the pursuant royal charter of 1691 guaranteeing religious toleration to all Protestants, were signs of seismic shifts in New England polity.” However, E. Brooks Holifield, “Peace, Conflict, and Ritual in Puritan Congregations,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (1993): 568, notes that between 1690 and 1729, 159 ecclesiastical trials are recorded among seven congregations. Thus one must look at this matter geographically, and for our purposes it is important to note that the church in Northampton under Solomon Stoddard saw a dramatic decrease in the number of disciplinary cases in his later ministry. See Emil Oberholzer, *Delinquent Saints; Disciplinary Action in the Early Congregational Churches of Massachusetts* (Columbia Studies in the Social Sciences 590; New York: AMS, 1968), 261–62.

¹⁸ Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 195.

¹⁹ For a thorough study of the Halfway Covenant, see Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Wipf & Stock, 2002).

measure thus brought the children into the covenant and under the disciplinary ‘watch’ of the church without corrupting church purity.”²⁰ Mutual watchfulness, however, began to become less important and thus, while not universal, the practice of discipline came into decline at least partially due to increased laxity in ecclesiology. It is important to keep this background in mind as one considers the views and practice of church discipline as seen in the ministry of Edwards.

2. Edwards’s Ecclesiology

Before looking specifically at Edwards’s view of church discipline, it is crucial that one understand his ecclesiology, which more broadly explicates the foundation of his viewpoint. For Edwards it is important to note that his ecclesiology was rooted in his doctrine of God. Bezzant writes, “The work of Father, Son and Spirit provides the grammar within which Edwards’s doctrine of the church can be viewed.”²¹ Further, Edwards’s conflation of the themes of the immanent and the economic Trinity, which became a key component of Edwards’s theology, serves our understanding of his ecclesiology well. His dynamic and ordered conception of Trinitarian relations is seen in the dynamic yet ordered life of the church. Schafer likewise asserts that any effort to understand Edwards’s doctrine of the church as a part of his system of thought must begin with the question, “Why did God create the world?”²²

Edwards answered this question briefly in the following way: “That which more especially was God’s end in his eternal purpose of creating the world, and of the sum of his purposes with respect to creatures, was to procure a spouse, or a mystical body, for his Son.”²³ One may note, particularly from Edwards’s essay *The End for Which God Created the World* that the triune God created the universe ultimately for the emanation of his own glory, and Edwards would argue that this is also for the good of the creature.²⁴ The church is the point in the created realm wherein the glory of God became prominently visible.²⁵ In this way, Edwards linked his ecclesiology with his understanding of the Trinitarian God.

Early in his career Edwards described the church more generically as “the body of Christ, [the] mystical body of Christ.”²⁶ However, in May 1741, at the height of the Great Awakening, Edwards began to define the church more specifically: “the church of Christ is the whole society of true saints”; further, in April 1744, he maintained that the church “is that company of men that is by the grace of God effectually

²⁰ Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties*, 91.

²¹ Bezzant, “Orderly But Not Ordinary,” 59.

²² Thomas A. Schafer, “Jonathan Edwards’ Conception of the Church,” *Church History* 24, no. 1 (1955): 52–53.

²³ Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies: Entry Nos. 1153–1360* (ed. Douglas A. Sweeney; The Works of Jonathan Edwards 23; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 178 (no. 1245).

²⁴ “Basic to Edwards’ understanding of the nature of the church was his belief that God has ‘elected’ the church *in Christ* for God’s own glory.” Sweeney, “The Church,” 169 (emphasis original). See also Schafer, “Jonathan Edwards’ Conception of the Church,” 54.

²⁵ See Michael James McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 452–53.

²⁶ Jonathan Edwards, “Living to Christ and Dying to Gain,” *Sermons and Discourses, 1720–1723* (ed. Wilson H. Kinnach; The Works of Jonathan Edwards 10; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 566. See also Jonathan Edwards, *The “Miscellanies”: Nos. 501–832* (ed. Ava Chamberlain; The Works of Jonathan Edwards 18; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 336 (no. 710), wherein he says, “The church is Christ mystical.”

called out from this fallen, undone [world] and gathered together in one in Christ Jesus, through him to worship God and have the peculiar enjoyment of him.”²⁷ Therefore, the church, according to Edwards, includes within its (true) membership only those who are born again, who have died to their old ways and risen with Christ through faith to a new pattern of life.

Stoddard and Edwards, thus, had their differences when it came to a proper ecclesiology. Stoddard maintained that whether or not someone had experienced a saving work of the Holy Spirit was not necessarily discernable by others. Because the saving work of the Holy Spirit could be undetectable, Stoddard taught that persons who agreed with the doctrines of Christianity and were moral in their conduct could be part of the church and partake of communion, whether they professed such a saving work or not.²⁸ Edwards, however, believed that only true believers were part of the church, and as such only they should partake of the Lord’s Supper:

In order to men’s being regularly outward members of the Christian Church, they should be visible Christians, or visibly Christians. Now by being visibly Christians nothing else can be understood but being in appearance Christians, appearing really Christians, true Christians. When we say ‘true Christians in appearance,’ it can’t be understood that it is meant that he should appear so to a prejudiced, and weak, and unfair uncharitable judgment . . . Nor . . . that he should appear so in the eye of every particular man . . . Therefore to be a visible Christian is to appear to be a real Christian in the eye of a public Christian judgment and to have a right in Christian reason and according to Christian rules to be received and treated as such.²⁹

Edwards was calling for a regenerate communicant membership, particularly when it came to partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Edwards ultimately disagreed with his grandfather regarding the Lord’s Supper, teaching that those who come to the Table ought to do so with a personal profession of saving faith.³⁰

In this sense Edwards was not calling for an arduous process whereby the potential communicant is subjected to congregational questioning and the articulation of a conversion that followed a particular pattern; but neither was he willing to allow “halfway members” the same rights and privileges as that of true saints.³¹ By preserving its strengths and adapting its expression, Edwards brought new life to New England ecclesiology. Bezzant argues that while Edwards was indeed “not ordinary” in that he emphasized individual affections and immediate conversion, he was nonetheless “orderly” in his conception of the church as God’s ordained instrument for carrying the gospel to the world. Rather than return to an outdated Old Church model, Edwards brought the old and the new together into a synthesis that addressed the concerns of his day.³² Thus it is crucial to note in Edwards’s ecclesiology,

²⁷ Sweeney, “The Church,” 168–69. Sweeney is citing here from unpublished sermons on Rev 22:16–17 and Col 1:24 respectively.

²⁸ Solomon Stoddard, *The Doctrine of Instituted Churches Explained and Proved from the Word of God* (London: Ralph Smith, 1700), 18–22.

²⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies: a-500* (ed. Thomas A. Schafer; The Works of Jonathan Edwards 13; Yale University Press, 1994), 412 (no. 335). See also *Ibid.*, 415 (no. 339).

³⁰ Alan D. Strange, “Jonathan Edwards on Visible Sainthood: The Communion Controversy in Northampton,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 14 (2003): 98.

³¹ This trajectory of ecclesiological views in early America is described well in *ibid.*, particularly 100–106.

³² See Bezzant, “Orderly But Not Ordinary,” 210.

specifically relating to church discipline, an emphatic strand of belief in regenerate church membership that is derived from his views of God and the make-up of the church.

3. Edwards's View of Discipline

Though not the most thoroughly treated area by Edwards, it cannot be maintained that Edwards was prompted to form his doctrine of excommunication after the failures of later awakenings; rather it seems he thought through this issue early in his pastoral ministry. In November 1722 Edwards asserted regarding excommunication, "So excellently is this sort of punishment contrived that when it is just it is exceedingly to be dreaded as a punishment from heaven." He continues, "And thus it is that whosoever sins are justly retained, are retained in heaven. . . . What man doth is only for himself, to keep himself free from sin; but the punishment is Christ's, who is the sole head of the church."³³ In October 1730 Edwards stated, "They that are regularly and justly excommunicated, they are bound in heaven; the wrath of God abides upon them."³⁴ Edwards goes on to assert that one can be restored and that a church can even be mistaken in a disciplinary case, but the church has the authority of Christ to rule in such matters according to Matt 16:19.³⁵ In 1733 Edwards spoke regarding discipline in a treatise concerning the visible church. Here again Edwards took up Matt 16:19 to demonstrate that what is bound and loosed in the church is also done in heaven, and when someone is excommunicated, "they are cast out of God and are treated by him as those that have proved treacherous and unfaithful to him."³⁶

Another major source that allows us to better understand Edwards's view of discipline is a sermon entitled "The Means and Ends of Excommunication."³⁷ Edwards preached this sermon on July 22, 1739, and it is based on 1 Cor 5 as well as 2 Thess 3:6. Based on these texts Edwards asserted that as a church they are called to cleanse out the old leaven, which refers to "visible wicked men."³⁸ As such, excommunication consists of "being cast off from the enjoyment of the privileges of God's visible people."³⁹ This includes four key privileges: "first, from the charity of the church; second, brotherly society; third, fellowship of the church in worship; fourth, internal privileges of visible Christians."⁴⁰ Edwards explicates these four points throughout much of the sermon.

³³ Edwards, *The Miscellanies*, 13:172 (no. q). Specific dates for these three Miscellanies come from Schafer, "Editor's Introduction, WJE, 13:92, 107; Chamberlain, "Editor's Introduction," WJE, 18:45.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13:528 (no. 485).

³⁵ See *ibid.*

³⁶ Edwards, *The "Miscellanies,"* 18:259–60 (no. 689). Edwards interestingly ties this understanding of excommunication in with the perseverance of the saints. He asserts, based on Ezek 3:20, that people can have the appearance of righteousness, but may at a later time fall away from the faith. This is not a loss of salvation, but a revelation of who these kinds of people really were all along. See *ibid.*, 18:260–61.

³⁷ Jonathan Edwards, "The Means and Ends of Excommunication," in *Sermons and Discourses, 1739–1742* (ed. Harry S. Stout and Nathan O. Hatch; The Works of Jonathan Edwards 22; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 69–80. The next section analyzes the disciplinary issue that this sermon addresses. At this point we are looking solely at Edwards's understanding of the doctrine.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 22:70.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 22:71. This severity is somewhat tempered in that Edwards believed, "excommunication is used for that end [of ultimate restoration], that we may thereby obtain their good" (*ibid.*, 22:74).

First, those who suffer excommunication are barred from the charity of the church. Edwards maintains that the church can no longer “look upon them as saints or worshippers of God,” and as such the excommunicant is cut off from the benevolence and good will of the church.⁴¹ This would have been a distinct punishment to those in need of monetary support coming from the church, but Edwards admonishes the congregation to not deprive these people of love, in hopes they will repent.

Second, excommunicated members are removed from brotherly society. Edwards states, “God’s people are not only to avoid society with visibly wicked men in sacred things, but, as much as may be, avoid them and withdraw from them as to that common society which is proper towards Christians.”⁴² More specifically he asserted, “And particularly we are forbidden such a degree of society with them, or appearance of associating ourselves with them, as there is [in] making them our guests at our tables or being their guests at their tables; as is manifest in the text, where we are commanded to have no company with such, no not to eat.”⁴³ Thus we see that Edwards rigorously applied 1 Cor 5 in a way that carried into societal relationships.

Third, excommunicated members lose fellowship with the church. Edwards gave particulars regarding what this lost privilege entails and asserted that those under discipline can have no fellowship with the church in baptism, the Lord’s Supper, prayers, or singing God’s praises.⁴⁴ While an excommunicant cannot join in public worship Edwards does exhort members of the church to commit the person to prayer and so include him in this way in hopes that he will eventually be restored. Finally, Edwards maintained that those who are excommunicated are removed from the internal privileges of visible Christians. He argued that such people are cast out of God’s sight, much as Cain was, and thus they are not “in the way of those smiles of providence” as the visible church is.⁴⁵

Edwards then dealt briefly with 1 Cor 5:5, which speaks of handing one over to Satan. He asserted that it is reasonable to suppose that God is willing to make the devil the instrument of “those peculiar severe chastisements that their apostasy deserves.”⁴⁶ Those under excommunication deserve more severe chastisement than the unsaved, according to Edwards, and thus are delivered to Satan for the

⁴¹ Ibid., 22:72.

⁴² Ibid., 22:73.

⁴³ Ibid. This is consistent with a note Edwards makes regarding 1 Cor 5:11 within his Blank Bible. He maintains, “The Apostle doubtless means not only eating at the Lord’s Table, but at any table, by the manner of expression, “No not to eat,” or “No not so much as to eat.” The Apostle would not express himself so of eating at the Lord’s Table, which is the highest act of communion; but he evidently speaks of some lower act. And that ’tis a common eating will further appear, if we consider that it was the manner of the Jews at that time to abstain from eating with those that they looked upon as unclean. Therefore they would not eat with the Gentiles, as Galatians 2:12. And so they would not eat with publicans and sinners. Hence they found so much fault with Christ for eating with them (Matthew 9:11 and Mark 2:16). But Christ commands that excommunicated persons should be unto us ‘as an heathen man and a publican’ [Matt 18:17].” See Jonathan Edwards, *The “Blank Bible”* (ed. Stephen J. Stein; The Works of Jonathan Edwards 24; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 1041.

⁴⁴ Edwards, “The Means and Ends of Excommunication,” 22:76. Interestingly, while this section of the sermon appears to rule out every aspect of public worship from those under excommunication, in a later sermon Edwards allows for the preaching aspect of the service to be heard by such people. See David D. Hall, ed., *Ecclesiastical Writings* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards 12; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 299–300. It is possible that Edwards’s view on such matters changed over time, but he was always consistent with fencing the Table.

⁴⁵ Edwards, “The Means and Ends of Excommunication,” 22:76–77.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 22:78

destruction of the flesh, “so we may well suppose either that God is wont to let Satan loose, sorely to molest them outwardly or inwardly, so by severe means to destroy the flesh and humble them.”⁴⁷ He maintains that God can use this time to bring the sinner back in repentance or to further harden them, “yet whether it shall prove the destruction of the flesh and the eternal and more dreadful destruction of them, is at God’s sovereign disposal.”⁴⁸ While the church declares ministerially the binding and loosing of all such persons, God is ultimately sovereign over the matter.

Edwards concluded this sermon noting three particular aims involved in the practice of church discipline.

First. That the church may be kept pure and God’s ordinances not defiled. This end is mentioned in the context: that the other members themselves may not be defiled. ’Tis necessary that they thus bear a testimony against sin.

Second. That others may be deterred from wickedness. That others may fear.

Third. That they may be reclaimed, [that their] souls may be saved. [After] other, more gentle, means have been used in vain, then we are to use severe means to bring ’em to conviction and shame and humiliation, by being rejected and avoided by the church, treated with disrespect, disowned by God, delivered to Satan, his being made the instrument of chastising them.

This is the last means, with concomitant admonitions, that the church is to use for the reclaiming those members of the church that become visibly wicked; which, if it be’nt effectual, what is next to be expected is destruction without remedy.⁴⁹

Thus Edwards had the good of the church and of the one under discipline in mind when he considered and practiced excommunication. One of the most intriguing themes in this sermon is how much attention Edwards gave to the ethics of love and how much he expected of his congregation in terms of their own acts of love in interactions with those being disciplined outside of church.⁵⁰ Edwards’s hope in this difficult practice of church discipline was that sinners would be turned from the error of their ways while under judgment and repent and that others may be deterred from sin and persevere in their faith.

4. Edwards’s Practice of Discipline

While Edwards’s views regarding church discipline were not necessarily innovative, it is of interest to note how he applied this doctrine in actual church cases, particularly in relation to the time of the Awakening. There are in fact no disciplinary cases noted in Edwards’s early ministry, though this certainly changes in the 1740s as a number of members fell under disciplinary measures. Sweeney concludes that it is no coincidence that Edwards worked hardest to align Northampton’s polity with

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 22:78–79.

⁵⁰ Ted Rivera, *Jonathan Edwards on Worship: Public and Private Devotion to God* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 64–65: “Given the sometimes severe Puritan excesses in this regard, Edwards must be recognized as comparatively restrained in the official exercise of church discipline, in that we have extant only one excommunication sermon. This was the first excommunication to take place at Northampton in 28 years, dating back to the ministry of Edwards’ grandfather, Solomon Stoddard.”

his doctrine of the church beginning in the 1740s, the height of the Awakening. By the dawn of the decade, he feared that many in his own congregation were hypocrites, and that number only expanded in the heat of the revivals. Thus discipline began to play a more pronounced role in Edwards's pastoral ministry around the time of the Awakening in 1740–42.⁵¹

At this point in his ministry it is important to note that Edwards was engaging in discipline not only at a corrective level, but also in a formative sense. Rivera observes that with virtually every sermon, Edwards was about the work of church and community discipline: "One could not sit in the pews when Edwards preached, over the course of any sustained period, and avoid 'discipline' on not merely external matters such as Mrs. Bridgman's drunkenness, but respecting such inward matters as hypocrisy, greed, lust, and supremely the hardness of an unconverted heart."⁵² Thus as Edwards practiced church discipline in a consistent manner throughout this time, it should not have come as a shock to his church who heard him continually preach in a "disciplinary" manner.

In relation to actual disciplinary cases, the first is in 1738 as Edwards's attention is drawn to a Mrs. Bridgman, whose continued drunkenness was known to the community. In July Edwards preached a sermon of censure from Deut 29:18–21 dealing with the nature of hypocrisy. In this sermon Edwards asserted, "That those that go on in the sin of drunkenness under the light of God's word are in the way to bring God's fearful wrath and a most amazing destruction upon themselves."⁵³ Edwards actually called Mrs. Bridgman to "stand forth and distinguish herself" during this sermon, noting all the means of grace that have been available to her in the church as well as the fact that she had been admonished both in private and in public. Edwards warned her "in the name of Jesus Christ the great head of the church and judge of the quick and dead and in his presence and in the presence of the holy angels . . . to forsake this wicked practice and to be thorough and final in your reformation." If she refused to comply, Edwards declared, "I do now this day in the name of God solemnly denounce unto you that God will not spare you."⁵⁴

Due to an apparent lack of repentance, Edwards was compelled to preach a follow-up sermon on July 22, 1739, entitled "The Means and Ends of Excommunication," outlining his justification to proceed with the first excommunication in Northampton since 1711. Though not named, the target of his exposition was once again Mrs. Bridgman.⁵⁵ Stout refers to this incident with Mrs. Bridgman as "the first in a spate of excommunications that occurred at Northampton during the Great Awakening."⁵⁶

In June 1740 he led in the founding of a local committee to consider matters of difficulty that would arise in the church, which, in effect, institutionalized his concern to promote the purity of the church.⁵⁷

⁵¹ See Sweeney, "The Church," 187.

⁵² Rivera, *Jonathan Edwards on Worship*, 66. Examples of such sermons can be found in Patricia J. Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth Century Northampton* (American Century Series; New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 130–34.

⁵³ Jonathan Edwards, "482. Sermon on Deut. 29:18-21 (July 1738)," in *Sermons, Series II, 1738, and Undated, 1734-1738* (Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2008), 482.

⁵⁴ See *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ See *Ibid.* See also Bezzant, "Ordered Ecclesiastical Life," 4.

⁵⁶ Stout, Introduction to "The Means and Ends of Excommunication," 22:66.

⁵⁷ Much of the following summary of Edwards's disciplinary cases is derived from Sweeney, "The Church," 187–88. Sweeney derives some of this information about disciplinary cases from several works not currently published. These include the following: "Records of the First Church of Christ," Northampton, book 1, 25, Forbes

Edwards became increasingly concerned with church “order” in Northampton, as socially inappropriate behavior and speech mushroomed during the Great Awakening.⁵⁸ The following month he publically shamed another parishioner, Hannah Pomeroy, for breaking the ninth commandment in reproaching her neighbor. In August 1741, he excommunicated Pomeroy due to the fact that she would not repent. In 1742, Edwards persuaded his congregation to renew its corporate covenant, pledging again to “seek and serve God” by practicing Christian charity.⁵⁹

In February 1743, he acted as a consultant in the rebuke of Bathsheba Kingsley, an itinerant minister from Westfield who claimed immediate revelations and subsequently neglected her wifely duties in the pursuit of a preaching ministry.⁶⁰ Kingsley was ultimately admonished to fulfill her duties in the home instead of,

Almost perpetually wandering about from house to house and very frequently to other towns under the notion of doing Christ’s work and delivering his messages . . . often disobeying her husband’s commands in going abroad . . . and taking her husband’s horse to go to other towns contrary to his mind . . . Mrs. Kingsley has of late almost wholly cast off that modest, shamefacedness and sobriety, and meekness, diligence and submission that becomes a Christian woman in her place.⁶¹

Her husband was also reprovved and encouraged to take better care of his wife, given the reference to her emotional frailty encoded in the description of her “weak vapory habit of body” and her “continual tumult like the sea in a storm being destitute of that peace and rest in God that other Christians enjoy.”⁶²

In June 1743, Edwards excommunicated another parishioner, Samuel Danks, for fornication and contempt of the authority of the church.⁶³ Although little is known of this case, it appears that Danks would not submit to the church’s discipline in relation to his sexual conduct and, as such, came under excommunication.

Library, Northampton Massachusetts; “Copy of a Covenant, enter’d into and Subscribed, by the People of God at Northampton . . . on a Day of Fasting and Prayer for the gracious Presence of God in that Place. March 16, 1741, 2,” Edwards Collection, Andover–Newton Theological School; “Some Reasons briefly hinted at, why Those Rules Exod. 22:16 & Deut. 22:28–29, relating to the Obligation of a man to marry a virgin that He had humbled, ought to be esteemed, as to the substance of them, as moral & of perpetual Obligation; with Hints of Answer to Objections,” Edwards Collection, Andover–Newton Theological School (on the Hawley/Root fornication case of 1747/48).

⁵⁸ So Stout, Introduction to “The Means and Ends of Excommunication,” 22:66.

⁵⁹ For further commentary on this process of renewing the covenant, see Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor*, 150–54.

⁶⁰ See Jonathan Edwards, “Advice to Mr. and Mrs. Kingsley, February 17, 1743,” in *Church and Pastoral Documents* (The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online 39; Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2007).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.* Interestingly Edwards maintains that Kingsley’s itinerant prophesying and mystical revelations are to be channeled but not stifled, although Edwards will sternly rebuke Moses Lyman for a similar expression of charismatic license shortly after this. So Bezzant, “Ordered Ecclesiastical Life,” 5.

⁶³ Northampton Church Records, Book 1, 25. This source was found in Stout, Introduction to “The Means and Ends of Excommunication,” 22:66, fn. 7.

The most infamous of Edwards's church discipline cases came in 1744 with the "Bad Book Affair."⁶⁴ The case was one of the reasons Edwards's Northampton pastorate came to an end. A number of young men in Edwards's congregation (ages 21–29) had been passing around a midwifery manual and subsequently using its contents to taunt young women of the congregation. According to testimony, such behavior had been occurring for as long as five years.

When Edwards learned of this lascivious behavior, he brought the matter before the church. In March, Edwards preached a sermon on Heb 12:15–16 as a way of introducing the scandal to the church. At a meeting after the service, he laid the situation before the members and obtained permission to investigate the matter. A committee, consisting of some of the most prestigious men in town, was appointed to conduct the inquiry. After a subsequent Sunday service, he read a list of names of certain youth who were to report to his house for a time of investigation.⁶⁵ In a tactical error Edwards did not distinguish between the witnesses and the offenders, and, as such, cast a shadow of suspicion on the innocent, raising the ire of several prominent families. The town was in an uproar, and Edwards sought to defend his actions by noting that this was a public offense and that it was his duty as pastor to see to it that order and purity were maintained. The case, in his mind, was one of scandal, and it needed to be dealt with. Edwards connected this incident with his continued struggle over "hypocrites" coming and partaking of the Lord's Supper. Edwards was convinced that he could not offer the offenders the Lord's Supper in that they were living contrary to a life of godliness. Eventually the leaders of the group were compelled to offer public confessions,⁶⁶ but the damage to Edwards's pastorate was done.⁶⁷

The final two cases of church discipline in Edwards's ministry in Northampton were issues of fornication dealt with from 1747 to 1749. First, Edwards was involved in the excommunication of Thomas Wait for fornication and denial of paternity in February 1747. Not only did Wait refuse to confess his sin, he also publicly denied fathering Jemimah Miller's child and maintained that Miller's word should not be accepted as true without corroboration. The church, however, sided with Miller, and

⁶⁴ This summary is derived mainly from George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 292–302; Ava Chamberlain, "Bad Books and Bad Boys: The Transformation of Gender in Eighteenth-Century Northampton, Massachusetts," in *Jonathan Edwards at Home and Abroad: Historical Memories, Cultural Movements, Global Horizons* (ed. David William Kling and Douglas A. Sweeney; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 61–81. See also Jonathan Edwards, "Documents Relating to the 'Bad Book' Case," WJE 39.

⁶⁵ "All but one of the boys on the list were church members, most having joined during the 1734–35 Connecticut Valley Awakening" (Chamberlain, "Bad Books and Bad Boys," 63).

⁶⁶ Chamberlain notes that when the committee met to interview the accused, the youth "compounded their offense by speaking contemptuously of the committee's members and playing childish games during its proceedings, thus bringing upon themselves the further charge of contempt of authority." Thus, as it relates to later confessions, Chamberlain maintains that of the three extant confessions, two address the charge of contempt of authority alone, and only one boy confessed to the original offense of "lascivious speech." See *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Bezzant, "Ordered Ecclesiastical Life," 6: "It also appears that Edwards's own frustration with the youth has colored his responses, those very young adults about whom he had written so glowingly just a few years earlier in the revivals when they had shown such spiritual promise." Bezzant notes that several of these young men were converted and shepherded by him during the Awakening, and thus his disappointment and frustration was exacerbated by this event.

thus Wait was excommunicated, though his appeal against the censure was accepted and later brought before a council.⁶⁸

The second case involved Martha Root and Elisha Hawley, a young military officer and grandson of Solomon Stoddard.⁶⁹ Root claimed that Hawley was the father of her illegitimate child (the survivor of a set of twins). Hawley was part of one of Northampton's wealthiest and most prominent families. While the Hawley and Root families had settled the matter of Hawley impregnating Root privately (with a large sum of money and an agreement they would not marry),⁷⁰ soon after Edwards felt compelled to interfere and wrote a letter stating that the couple should be married. Hawley was to undergo excommunication if he did not confess his sin and determine to marry Root, and thus Hawley appealed his case to a council of ministers. The ministers of Hampshire, however, voted that it was not Elisha's duty to marry Martha and told Hawley that he was subject to his own conscience. He was told to confess his sin of fornication, which he seemingly did since his name is on later church records. This episode may have been more painful for Edwards since the Hawley boys were converted under his tutelage and had shown such signs of promise during the Awakening but now sorely disappointed their pastor and mentor.

"In short, Edwards labored long and hard on the purity of the church, especially in the wake of the revivals. He preached quite often on matters of discipline."⁷¹ Although Edwards may be viewed in contemporary terms as being rigid and mean-spirited, he sought to persuade people to repent of known public sin so that they might be restored. One example of this is the disciplinary course taken against the notorious itinerant James Davenport, in which Edwards played a major role and eventually led to Davenport's recantation and resettlement in the ministry.⁷² Also, in a noteworthy letter to Elnathan Whitman, dated February 9, 1744, Edwards pled for liberty of conscience in order to reclaim straying parishioners. When some members of Whitman's church absented themselves from Sunday worship in order to hear New Light preachers, Edwards counseled patience and understanding rather than harsh measures more suited to "contumacious offenders."⁷³

Yet while noting his desire to persuade, Edwards was unrelenting in his pursuit of a pure church, exacting a strict ecclesial discipline.⁷⁴ This is seen in the cases previously examined, as well as his dealings in 1749 with the communion controversy at Northampton. Though not a disciplinary case *per se*, it is directly connected to the issue of discipline in that Edwards sought to maintain a boundary around the Lord's Table that would include true believers only in partaking of the elements. Those excommunicated would be excluded from the Table. In answer to a question regarding whether someone must express

⁶⁸ Jonathan Edwards, "To the Reverend Robert Breck," in *Letters and Personal Writings* (ed. George S. Claghorn; The Works of Jonathan Edwards 16; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 221–22.

⁶⁹ Much of the summary of this case comes from Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor*, 164–66.

⁷⁰ Chamberlain, "Bad Books and Bad Boys," 74: "Elisha's brother Joseph was a young attorney eager to make a reputation for himself, and with his assistance Elisha went to great lengths to avoid accepting any financial or moral responsibility for the child." Root, as a result of this action, brought a civil suit against Hawley and was given a monetary settlement of £155.

⁷¹ Sweeney, "The Church," 184.

⁷² Claghorn, "Editor's Introduction," WJE, 16:11. See also Edwards, "Letter to the Reverend Eleazer Wheelock," 16:145–46.

⁷³ See Edwards, "Letter to the Reverend Elnathan Whitman," 16:127–33.

⁷⁴ Edwards's own practice of censuring women for drunkenness and men for fornication was out of step with his own context. See Fitzgerald, "Drunkards, Fornicators and a Great Hen Squabble," 66, 79.

saving faith and repentance in order to be admitted to the Lord's Supper, Edwards answered in the affirmative.⁷⁵ Following Jonathan Mitchel, Edwards argued that this laxity in obtaining a profession of faith from congregants coming to the Table "will not only lose the power of godliness, but in a little time bring in profaneness, and ruin the churches, these two ways. (1) Election of ministers will soon be carried by a formal looser sort. (2) The exercise of discipline will, by this means, be impossible. And discipline falling, profaneness riseth like a flood."⁷⁶ One can see from such a statement that Edwards's view of discipline and the Lord's Supper was shaped by a robust ecclesiology, consisting of regenerate membership. This view demonstrates why Edwards focused so vigorously on conversion, progressive sanctification, and perseverance in the faith.

5. Edwards's Discipline in Relation to His Soteriology

It seems clear from Edwards's discussion of excommunication thus far, that if a church acts in accord with truth, the person that comes under such discipline is shown to be an unbeliever and in need of repentance. Edwards also asserted that after one's conversion there is "much need of persons' care and diligence to persevere," and this communal aspect of caring for one another's spiritual growth is a "proper and decreed means of perseverance."⁷⁷ Elsewhere he averred,

Universal and persevering obedience is as directly proposed to be sought and endeavored by us, in Scripture, as necessary to salvation [and] as the condition of our salvation, as faith in Jesus Christ; and a wicked man may properly be exhorted directly to strive to break off his sins and resist his temptations, and to bring himself to a thorough willingness, and fixed resolution and disposition of mind, utterly to have done with gratifying his lusts, or allowing himself in any way of sin; with that to enforce it, that if he doth, he shall have eternal life. And he would do prudently, and according to the direction of God's Word, in directly attempting of it and immediately setting about [it], in beginning to deny himself, and resolutely resisting the temptations as they come.⁷⁸

While neither of these sections from Edwards mentions church discipline specifically, it is evident that he took the perseverance of the saints quite seriously, believed the congregation to be involved in the process of helping one another to persevere, and that the wicked must repent of their sins and endure in God-given obedience. Thus Edwards implicitly connected discipline and perseverance.

Along these lines Edwards commented that there were people in the NT churches who, after their admission into membership, fell into offensive behavior. The apostles gently exhorted some of these people, while others who had behaved themselves in an overtly scandalous manner were spoken of in explicit language to expose their wickedness. "The apostle Paul, in his epistles to the Corinthians, oftentimes speaks of some among them that had embraced heretical opinions, and had behaved themselves in a very disorderly and schismatical manner, whom he represents as exposed to censure, and to whom he threatens excommunication." He continues and notes, "upon occasion of so many offenses of this kind appearing among them that for a while had been thought well of, he puts 'em all upon

⁷⁵ Edwards, "An Humble Inquiry," WJE, 12:338.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 12:340.

⁷⁷ Edwards, "Perseverance. Assurance.," 13:475.

⁷⁸ Edwards, "Condition of Salvation, Universal and Persevering Obedience," 13:532–33.

examining themselves, whether they were indeed in the faith, and whether Christ was truly in them, as they and others had supposed.”⁷⁹ Again, Edwards explicitly connected conversion, excommunication, and perseverance.

In referring to excommunication as a punishment, as evidenced by 2 Cor 2:6, Edwards argued that even though discipline is not designed by men “for the destruction of the person that is the subject of it, but for his correction . . . yet ’tis in itself a great and dreadful calamity, and the most severe punishment that Christ has appointed in the visible church.”⁸⁰ And even though the church is to seek only the good of the person under discipline and their recovery from sin, “there appearing upon proper trial no reason to hope for the person’s recovery by gentle means,” it is at God’s sovereign disposal whether it shall be “for a person’s humbling or their dreadful and eternal destruction, as it always is one or the other.”⁸¹

Edwards believed, “The church is to have a greater concern for their [the excommunicated] welfare still than if they never had been brethren, and therefore ought to take more pains to reclaim them and to save them by admonishing them and otherwise than they are obliged to take towards those that have been always brethren.” He continues,

That consideration—that he has been a brother heretofore, and that we han’t so finally cast him off from that relation, but that we are still hoping and using means that he may be such an one—obliges us to concern ourselves more for the good of their souls than of those that we never had any concern with, and so to pray more for them and take more pains with them by admonishing them.⁸²

Edwards saw a significant role for church members in reclaiming the excommunicant, who had been a part of the church and seemed regenerate. In discipline, the church must pray for, admonish, and work for the good of the excommunicant’s soul, in hope that the person would repent and persevere in faith.

Edwards’s understanding of conversion, discipline, sanctification, and perseverance—as well as who could partake of the Lord’s Supper—is rooted in his understanding of visible sainthood. Solomon Stoddard saw visible sainthood as distinct from real sainthood, whereas Edwards believed that visible sainthood should, as much as possible, approximate real sainthood. In other words, Stoddard reasoned that since only God knows who the elect are, ministers should give all who say they believe in Christian doctrine and lead moral lives the benefit of the doubt and receive them as true believers. Edwards argued that only those who can credibly testify to the church’s leaders that they know the Lord and are walking with him should be considered true believers. “Stoddard’s practice led to most of the town being admitted to communion. Edwards’s position would have excluded more of the town than did Stoddard but not as many as were excluded under the old practice of requiring a narrative of grace that could withstand close congregational scrutiny.”⁸³ Thus Edward sought a verbal profession of genuine conversion coupled with ongoing, outward godliness as evidence for one’s genuine, saving faith.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Edwards, “An Humble Inquiry,” 12:237.

⁸⁰ Edwards, “The Means and Ends of Excommunication,” 22:70.

⁸¹ See *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 22:74.

⁸³ Strange, “Jonathan Edwards on Visible Sainthood,” 116–17.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

When revival came to Northampton in 1735 and in 1740–1742, during the Great Awakening, it never ceased to concern Edwards that many clergy and laypersons identified the presence of true revival with a person having had a moving religious experience and being able to relate the same “loudly and at length to others.” Edwards witnessed that many who claimed to have been religiously affected continued to lead lives that were manifestly lacking in love to God and neighbor. Incidents like the “bad book” affair, the reluctance of the congregation in regards to proper ministerial oversight in discipline, along with the abiding factional warfare among the residents of Northampton gave Edwards pause in this regard. He was convinced that if true religious affections were present in a person, then the same would manifest itself in “Christian practice.” He saw significant shortcomings in this regard, which caused him to require more evidence of visible sainthood than merely having participated in the revivals. Edwards wanted those who came to communion to be able not only to testify to the grace of God in their lives, but also in a way that made it clear that their claim of an inner saving work of God’s Spirit demonstrated itself in outward godliness. “Edwards wanted those coming to commune, in other words, to have good grounds for believing that they were truly regenerated and continually walking with the Lord. He wanted some assurance of salvation manifested on the part of those coming to communion.”⁸⁵

Edwards’s aims in church discipline—that the church may be kept pure, that others may be deterred from wickedness, and that the sinner might ultimately be reclaimed—revolve around Edwards’s understanding of conversion, sanctification, and perseverance.⁸⁶ Edwards expected to be able to determine with a fair amount of clarity who had undergone regeneration and expected to see Christian growth and perseverance. For those who falter in an unrepentant manner, he believed that discipline must be maintained to promote correction and purity. This also explains why Edwards went to such great lengths—even to the point of losing his pastorate in Northampton—to protect the purity of the Lord’s Supper, seeing to it that only visible Christians were partaking of the elements.⁸⁷ Discipline, for Edwards, was a crucial means by which he sought to judge whether someone was truly converted and persevering in their faith as should be expected of a Christian. As such, the function of discipline was crucial to Edwards’s ministry in maintaining a regenerate church membership and calling for the perseverance of the faithful.

This understanding of discipline and soteriology held by Edwards is also consistent with his ecclesiology. Schafer notes the continuity of Edwards’s ecclesiological vision in relation to the eschatological reality that is to come:

This unity of the Church’s life is manifested in its fellowship on earth, its destiny in heaven, and its triumph in history. Edwards’ doctrines of excellence and virtue provide a foundation for the fellowship of the saints, both here and hereafter. . . . The destiny of the saints is a perfect, yet increasing, mutuality and communion with one another in love. . . . God’s end in creation is realized inwardly in true virtue but outwardly in the

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 122–23.

⁸⁶ These ends of excommunication are found in Edwards, “The Means and Ends of Excommunication,” 78–79.

⁸⁷ A number of works seek to analyze the reasons Edwards was voted out of his church in Northampton. For a helpful popular level explanation see, Mark Dever, “How Jonathan Edwards Got Fired and Why It’s Important for Us Today,” in *A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor; Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 129–44.

'progress of the work of redemption.' The Church, heavenly and earthly, is the kingdom of God.⁸⁸

The church should be increasingly what it will be in God's consummated kingdom and what it already is in Christ. With this particular ecclesiological vision, Edwards longed to see a people progressively conformed to the image of Christ. Discipline was a natural corollary of such a view, as Edwards labored to present a bride to Christ that was unblemished and without spot or wrinkle.

6. Conclusion

Hall observes that the problem of authority in Edwards's ministry was not simply a matter of ecclesiastical procedures. Early and late in his career, according to Hall, he struggled to curb a temperamental impulse to judge and exclude others, an impulse he justified as essential to the life of the church and the work of the ministry. Perhaps because of the reactions this impulse provoked, he seems consistently to have imagined himself as surrounded by enemies and in ordination sermons of the mid-1740s likened ministers to Christ in their suffering. But he could also evoke the triumphant Christ and "promise final victory to those who 'maintained the exercise of discipline in the house of God.'"⁸⁹ In his *Farewell Sermon* Edwards spoke of such a victory for himself at the day of judgment where the townspeople of Northampton would acknowledge the legitimacy of his pastoral care.⁹⁰

Such a conclusion seems to be more of a negative analysis than is necessary, though one can certainly understand the difficulty to respond to Edwards's scenario in an overly gracious manner. Edwards may have struggled with an impulse to judge others, yet while more consistent in his discipline than many of his contemporaries, he sought to exercise this practice in a fairly gracious manner, always with a mind to persuade the excommunicant to repent of their sin. Understanding ecclesiology and soteriology as he did, with convictions formed deeply in Scripture, it seems natural that Edwards would treat church discipline with such seriousness, as the eternal lives of his people were potentially at stake.

⁸⁸ Schafer, "Jonathan Edwards' Conception of the Church," 55–56.

⁸⁹ Hall, "Editor's Introduction," WJE, 12:82.

⁹⁰ Edwards, "A Farewell Sermon," 25:463–81.