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Baptist leaders turning up heat on Clinton's church

By Greg Warner

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- While the nation's political leaders debate Bill Clinton's moral fitness for office, leaders in the president's denomination are arguing about his fitness for church membership -- and who should decide it.

Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, accused Clinton's home congregation -- Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark. -- of failing to punish the president for his extramarital relationships with White House intern Monica Lewinsky and others.

"How can President Clinton claim to be Southern Baptist and persist in this display of serial sin? Only because the congregation which holds his membership has failed to exercise any semblance of church discipline," Mohler wrote in a commentary for Religion News Service Aug. 24.

Mohler's commentary prompted a critical editorial in the Western Recorder, the Kentucky Baptist newspaper, which in turn brought a rebuke of the newspaper from Mohler's faculty at Southern Seminary.

In the Baptist tradition, which emphasizes local church autonomy, only local churches decide who is acceptable for church membership. Baptists have no official church hierarchy. But a Baptist association or convention -- including the Southern Baptist Convention -- can decide if a church is fit for membership in its group of churches.

The SBC in 1992 expelled two churches for condoning homosexuality and one year later tried but failed to expel Clinton's church for the president's support of homosexual rights. Then this year, the SBC reprimanded Clinton in June for authorizing federal protection of homosexuals in the workplace but fell a few votes short of asking Immanuel Baptist to take disciplinary action against him.

Now that Clinton apparently has admitted having a sexual relationship with Lewinsky and misleading prosecutors about it, critics in his denomination are again calling for Immanuel to act.

"Southern Baptists will be watching the Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock to see if it musters the courage to make clear its own convictions," wrote Mohler, who recently authored a chapter on church discipline for the book "The Compromised Church."

So far the church has had no response. Rex Horne, Immanuel's pastor and a confidant of Clinton's, has declined to respond to the criticism.

But Mark Wingfield, editor of the Western Recorder, accused Mohler of meddling.

"Al Mohler apparently thinks he knows more about how a certain Arkansas church ought to handle its business than that church itself knows," Wingfield wrote in a Sept. 1 editorial. "That's not only arrogant, it runs against the Baptist doctrine of the autonomy of the local church."

Criticizing Clinton is appropriate, Wingfield said. "But it is another thing entirely to then attempt to instruct the president's church on how they ought to relate to him as a member. This crosses the line from a free church tradition to a hyper-hierarchical church tradition."

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"If the SBC or a seminary president comes this close to telling one church what to do, what stands in the way of your church being the next one reprimanded or instructed?" Wingfield, a frequent critic of Mohler, asked Kentucky Baptists. Both the seminary and the newspaper are in Louisville, Ky.

In an unusual response, the faculty of Southern Seminary adopted a resolution Sept. 3 defending Mohler and his "call for the reinstatement of church discipline."

"Dr. Mohler's urgency about discipline exactly conforms to the biblical principles and Baptist practice of corporate holiness," the resolution said. "Exhortations from individuals and associations of churches have been prominent in Baptist history and constitute no violation of local church autonomy."

The resolution, written by faculty members, was approved 32-to-3, with one abstention, in a secret-ballot vote during a special faculty meeting. There are 53 members of the faculty.

In his editorial, Wingfield also accused Mohler of an "utter lack of Christian love" in his treatment of seminary faculty and staff, some of whom have been forced to leave in recent years. But, Wingfield added, "the editors of this paper would not think of telling his church it ought to exercise church discipline on him."

The seminary faculty responded: "We consider this editorial to contain an unkind, unwarranted and unsubstantiated personal attack against Dr. Mohler and his motives. ... Such attacks violate standard journalistic practice as well as the canons of Christian propriety."

In an earlier news release sent by the seminary to national media outlets, Mohler defended the concept of church discipline and his call to revive it among Baptists. "The lack of church discipline among our churches is scandalous," he said.

"As a matter of fact, discipline has been recognized for centuries as one of the essential marks for the true church," he said. "Our congregations have abdicated the clear New Testament responsibility to maintain the purity of the church and moral witness."

Mohler said calling on Immanuel to act does not violate local church autonomy. "... I have no power to force Immanuel Baptist Church to take any action, nor does the Southern Baptist Convention have any power to force the congregation to exercise church discipline. But it is by no means improper to call upon this church to exercise this most basic responsibility."

Wingfield said although Mohler lacks the authority to instruct Immanuel, he is using his role at the seminary to intimidate the church into taking action. "That is particularly obvious when he not only writes about it but then has his seminary staff drumming up publicity for it in the national media. What else could that be but intimidation?"

"I am not aware of any other time in recent Baptist history when an SBC agency head has launched a national campaign to intimidate a local church into taking some certain action," he said.

James Sullivan, a former denominational executive and an expert on Baptist polity, told Associated Baptist Press he is aware of no other cases where the Southern Baptist Convention or an agency head has sought to have a church discipline a member.

"I can't see that it is provided for in our polity system," said Sullivan, retired president of the SBC Sunday School Board and author of "Baptist Polity: As I See It."

Sullivan acknowledged church discipline, more popular in the past, is seldom practiced today. It fell from favor, he said, because "many churches had trouble distinguishing between the practical application of church discipline and the desire for revenge."

"It scared most of our churches off of discipline altogether, which I think is unwise," he said.

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