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Little Rock association leaders decry call for church 'discipline'

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) -- No outsiders have a right to call upon President Clinton's home church to discipline him, the executive board of Pulaski Baptist Association in Little Rock, Ark., declared Sept. 15.

A resolution adopted unanimously by the association's executive board states: "In response to the calls of certain Southern Baptists upon Immanuel Baptist Church of Little Rock to 'discipline' one of her own, we support our sister congregation and her pastor, Rex Horne, in allowing them to conduct their ministry as they see fit under the direction of God's Holy Spirit."

The resolution further declares that "no one outside that congregation has the right, nor the privilege, of trying to coerce Immanuel Baptist to do otherwise."

Over the past month, Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., has used national media to call on Immanuel Baptist Church to discipline Clinton for his admitted sexual indiscretion with a former White House intern.

"Bill Clinton's repeated pattern of sexual sin is something the nation can no longer ignore," Mohler wrote in a nationally distributed commentary. "How can the church in which he holds membership ignore what even the secular world considers scandalous?"

Mohler admonished that "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."

The Pulaski Association resolution does not express support for Clinton, nor does it speak to the issue of whether public church discipline is good or bad. Its stated intent is to "go on record as standing in firm support of our cherished doctrine of the autonomy of the local church."

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-- By Mark Wingfield

Modern Baptist churches take different approaches to church discipline

By Mark Wingfield

SOMERSET, Ky. (ABP) -- If Bill Clinton were a member of Mount Union Baptist Church in Somerset, Ky., he'd probably be facing formal church discipline right now.

If he were a member of Midway Baptist Church near Lexington, he most likely would be in private conversation with the pastor but would not face expulsion from the church.

These Kentucky churches illustrate two distinct ways Southern Baptist congregations relate to members who commit sins such as adultery.

Clinton's admission of an illicit sexual relationship with a former White House intern has brought this subject to the attention of the nation. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., has made an appeal via national media to Clinton's home church, Immanuel Baptist in Little Rock, Ark., to exercise formal discipline against him.

After weeks of silence on the subject, Immanuel's pastor, Rex Horne, told ABC News Sept. 12 that his church does not intend to take formal action against the president. This process, popularly called "churching" a member, involves revoking the church membership of the person until full confession is made and repentance is evidenced.

Mohler's comments about what he thinks the president's church should do ignited a national debate among Baptists over the biblical basis and practical wisdom of exercising church discipline today. The comments also sparked a debate over whether a denominational official has the right to call on a faraway church to take any such action.

Finding a Southern Baptist church that actively practices public church discipline today is difficult; the vast majority have not done so since the 19th century or early 20th century.

But Bill Meece, pastor of Mount Union Baptist Church in Somerset, Ky., said his congregation continues the practice, one he defends as mandated by the Bible.

"I believe it works," he said. "People are scared of it, but it must be done in love."

"Love" and "discipline" may not be two words the average person would expect to hear a pastor use in the same sentence, but Meece insists the two are related.

During his 18 months as the church's pastor, no formal action has been taken against an erring member, he said, although the church had disciplined people shortly before his arrival and has a long history of doing so. However, since he has been pastor, three individuals who had been expelled from church membership have come back, confessed, shown evidence of repentance and been reinstated, he said.

One of those was a woman expelled because she was "living openly in sin" in a sexual situation, Meece said.

"She came back and told us that she had repented, that she had recognized that what she had done was wrong," he explained. "She wanted fellowship restored between her and the church, and she wanted to get married. It was one of the best services I've ever been in. ... Tears of joy were streaming down her cheeks. The church gladly restored her. It was a joyous occasion."

This story illustrates what a loving congregation he serves, Meece said, explaining his church loves people enough to confront them when they sin and loves them enough to take them back when they repent. "I've never been in a church that is as loving."

Mount Union Baptist Church doesn't discipline members for just any sin, Meece said. The action is reserved only for "situations unbecoming a Christian and that bring dishonor upon the church, the body of Christ."

The way his church understands the biblical commands to hold each other accountable, the pastor and chairman of deacons begin the discipline process by speaking privately with the person accused of bringing shame to the church. If the person does not repent, the matter is brought before the entire church for action.

To be restored, the disciplined member must stand before the small congregation, confess the sin and indicate a desire to repent, he said.

About 75 miles north of Somerset, in the small town of Midway, situations of potential church discipline are handled differently.

"There are occasions in the minutes when someone has been churched for dancing or public intoxication," Pastor Mark Johnson explained. "But it's been at least 80 years if not 100."

He said the Midway church still believes in discipline but now administers it a different manner.

"The church is made up of sinners who have been redeemed in Jesus Christ," Johnson said. "We deal with issues of discipline, then, as those who need discipline as well as administer it. Our posture is never condemnation but redemption."

"Discipline rightly used in a church is always redemptively managed," he said. "The goal is always redemption."

At Midway, the pastor might engage in "private conversations" with a person known to be living in sin, "seeking ways to redeem the person without publicly humiliating them," Johnson said. That may include allowing a person to resign leadership positions in the church and helping the person get the proper counseling needed to address a problem, he added.

The lack of formal expulsions from church membership does not mean the Midway church believes Christians can or should get away with an "anything goes" mentality, Johnson said. "We must with clarity deal with situations, but we must redemptively deal with persons."

One problem with expelling people from church membership is knowing where to draw the line on which sins are "big" and which are "little," Johnson said.

"A better biblical understanding of sin is not to identify four or five things as those that are the main sins, but to realize we all are sinners and have a multiplicity of sins with which we live," he said. "The healthier perspective is to say it's not just about sexuality, not just about alcohol addiction. It's about all sorts of issues."

Though the Mount Union and Midway churches see their responsibilities for church discipline differently, the pastors of both congregations said their ultimate goals are the same: bringing people into the kingdom of God and helping them grow into mature disciples.

"We can get so caught up in condemning those things that anger us or upset us that we never get back to the higher business of sharing the gospel with those who will receive it," Johnson said.

Meece concurred, pointing out that even though his church exercises church discipline, that is a "rare" occurrence. "We have a lot more people coming for rededication and to be saved than for anything like this."

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Debate over church discipline is as old as the church

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Debate over how strict church discipline should be is as old as the church itself, according to Baptist historians and theologians.

"In the persecution of the early church, there were a lot of folks who lapsed, and there was a problem of what to do with people who had not been true to the faith," said Loyd Allen, professor of church history at Mercer University's school of theology in Atlanta.

Some in the first century church leaned toward forgiving those who lapsed, while others leaned toward condemnation, he said.

"In the early church there was considerable debate between those who wanted to take [sinners] back as soon as they fully repent; others said if you are a traitor to the faith you should never be let back in," Allen continued.

Both then and now, the call for church discipline must find balance between the two extremes, he said.

"Church discipline had two aims in the early church. One was maintaining the purity of the church. When that goes off to an extreme, it is too rigorous and legalistic. The second aim was a restoration of the offender. When that fails, it becomes too lax.

"The tension of those two is what we're looking at" as a recurring struggle in the church through the ages, Allen said.

Because of this struggle, the Christian church in time developed a formal system of discipline known as penitence.

"If a person committed a major sin, called a mortal sin, ... then that person had to confess his or her sins in front of the community of faith and the church leaders would ascribe a penance," said Tim Weber, a church historian and dean of Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Chicago.

The reason for demanding penance was because "talk is cheap," Weber said. "How do we know you mean it?"

Thus penance, the required performance of some assigned action, became a way of a repentant person proving his or her intention, Weber explained. "In some of the early churches, penitents, those who were under penance, would sit in a particular part of the church. After their penance was absolved, they were restored."

To many modern Baptists, this may sound like Roman Catholic doctrine. While the Roman Catholic church has carried this tradition forward more than modern Baptists, there is a shared heritage at this point, Weber said.

The road diverged later, when a need was perceived to speed up the penitential process. "It was too cumbersome to manage," Weber said. "So public confession became private. Absolution was given before the penance was performed. ... By the Middle Ages, after this change in order came about, the church got faced with the question of whether a person has been absolved of sin if they haven't performed an adequate penance."

That's where the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory comes in, he said. "You still owe God something, therefore you've got to go to purgatory and work it off."

That also led to the problem of the Catholic church in the Middle Ages selling indulgences to let people off the hook for the time they owed God in purgatory, he said.

Based on a common heritage, the modern Roman Catholic church, Eastern Orthodox church and Protestant-church movement all carried forward some elements of this formal system of discipline, Weber said.

"It is ironic that one of the only things Luther maintained out of the Catholic tradition was confession. But he said priests are not the only ones who can hear confession."

Within Protestant circles, the concept of church discipline went various directions, both Weber and Allen said. The concept was a major part of both Calvinist and Arminian traditions, although people sometimes link it more often with the Calvinist tradition, Weber said.

But non-Calvinist groups such as Methodists and Mennonites have a strong tradition of exercising church discipline.

The practice of formal church discipline was common in Baptist churches in America through the 19th century, Weber and Allen said.

People often were "churched" for major infractions such as adultery and drunkenness, but also for what today might appear lesser offenses, such as irregular attendance, dancing and card-playing.

Historians trace demise of discipline to changes around turn of the century

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- A funny thing happened to American Christianity on the way from the 19th century to the 20th century: urbanization. Churches began to be larger, more people moved from rural settings to big cities and a growing number of churches offered people multiple options for membership.

While good for growth of the church, these very factors led to the diminishing practice of church discipline, some Baptist historians and theologians contend.

As churches became larger and more diverse, the hard line between absolute right and absolute wrong tended to blur, said one scholar.

"In small communities, there could be very clear definitions of what is right and wrong," said Tim Weber, a church historian and dean of Northern Baptist Theological Seminary near Chicago. "But as churches got larger, and especially in cities, it became hard to draw a clear line."

Weber cited the research of Greg Wills, assistant professor of church history at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, as demonstrating that "churches stopped disciplining when the congregations got so big that people didn't know each other well, definitions got cloudy and competition got fierce."

In frontier-era communities, Weber said, there often was only one church and usually only one church of a particular denomination. When a church member fell into sin, "there wasn't anyplace else to go," he noted. "You had to face these people, and you had to take it."

That is not so today. Many churches are so large that most members don't know all the other members. And even if a person were expelled from one church, he or she could go down the street and join another.

It's hard to exercise church discipline on people you don't know and have no means of holding to accountability, Weber said.

Another factor was the revivalism of the 19th century, added Curtis Freeman, who teaches historical theology at Houston Baptist University.

"In 18th and early 19th century America, conversion was a process and it was a guided process, so that you didn't just go off to a camp meeting and come back and say, 'I'm converted,'" Freeman said. "It was a process that might go on for years. You weren't ever converted until you gave testimony of your faith and others reached the conclusion that you were converted."

"In the 19th century with the revival movements and the second awakening, religion becomes much more an individual experience, less a guided experience and more of an event," he said. "I the converted person become the judge of whether I'm truly converted, not the church."

By making it easier to open the door to church membership, Baptists and others made it more difficult to hold church members accountable for upholding certain standards, Freeman said.

For example, in the baptismal covenants of earlier centuries, new converts pledged to uphold certain standards and agreed to submit to church discipline if they sinned, he explained.

"When people began to assume the content of church membership was mainly based on the entry experience, they paid less attention to the discipling or nurturing aspect," said Loyd Allen, professor of church history at Mercer University's school of theology in Atlanta.

As a result, "what we have done with church discipline is intervene only when it's too late usually to redirect or restore balance in the person's spiritual life," Allen said. "Churches are quick to fire someone who has committed infidelity, but they're not quick to have given that person a place to work on problems like infidelity prior to its public expression."

"We pay very little attention to the word 'discipline,' which is very close to the word 'disciple,'" he said. "We've done very little to disciple them."

Ironically, a Southern Baptist church that does pay attention both to disciplining and discipline is one that has been most successful in exploiting those aspects of 20th century life blamed for making church discipline obsolete.

Saddleback Valley Community Church in Southern California attracts more than 10,000 people each week to worship. It's highly urban, located in the sprawling metropolis between Los Angeles and San Diego.

These factors might make it appear impossible to administer church discipline at Saddleback. Not so, said Pastor Rick Warren.

"I believe the practice of church discipline is essential for a healthy church," he said. "We have practiced it since the very beginning of our congregation."

As in churches of previous centuries, this modern-day mega church has linked church discipline to a more restrictive form of church membership. Anyone who wants to join Saddleback first must take a course called "Membership 101" and then sign a membership covenant. Part of that covenant is a commitment to "protect the testimony of our church by living a godly life."

"We take this seriously," Warren said. "Every year members are removed if they do not repent and make restitution for issues such as not paying bad debts owed to other members of the church; walking out on a spouse and family; sexual sins such as adultery, homosexuality, bisexuality or child abuse; spousal abuse, etc."

Saddleback's leaders first attempt to get the errant member into recovery or counseling programs sponsored by the church. "Our goal is always restoration, not punishment," Warren said.

"But if the person is unrepentant and unwilling to follow our prescription, we do not hesitate to remove them from church membership."

In 95 percent of such cases, where the sin is not widely known, this is handled privately by the church's nine elders, Warren said. "But in those few cases where the whole church knows about it, we've used letters to the membership to notify them of our actions.

"No vote is ever taken. This is not a democratic issue," he said. "We believe this is a biblical responsibility for the shepherds of the flock who will give an account for those we care for."

Warren said he "hates" doing church discipline, "but we do it because we want God's blessing on Saddleback. ... We have had many examples of people who were disciplined and later repented, came back and thanked us for doing the right thing."

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Scholars say most churches handle discipline cases badly

By Mark Wingfield

PINEVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- More church discipline is done in the wrong way than in the right way, according to some pastors, historians and theologians well-versed in the issue.

"A lot of churches exercising church discipline are not doing it biblically," said Charles Quarles, who teaches New Testament and Greek at Clear Creek Baptist Bible College in Pineville, Ky.

As a trainer of future ministers, Quarles advocates proper use of church discipline as an essential part of church life. As a pastor, he has practiced church discipline.

"One safety factor is to limit the exercise of discipline to issues that come under the grounds spelled out by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 and by Christ in the Gospel of Matthew," Quarles said. "Another is that the process should only be entered into prayerfully.

"Motivation is key. It should be entered into with grief and not with delight," he explained. "Sometimes the exercise of church discipline lacks the humility that Scripture demands."

Among misconceptions about what's biblical, Quarles said, is the belief that churches have a biblical mandate to expel inactive members. But Quarles said that is not one of the specific sins listed by Paul in his counsel regarding discipline to the New Testament-era church at Corinth.

In 1 Corinthians 5, the apostle addresses a problem of a man in the church who is having sexual relations with his stepmother. In addition to sexual immorality, Paul lists greed, idolatry, slander, drunkenness and swindling as grounds for expelling a person from the church.

"Some argue that Paul did not intend this list to be exhaustive, but I believe in many ways it is," Quarles said. The reason, he explained, is because Paul's list parallels the reasons given in the Old Testament for expulsion from the community.

Another common mistake churches make in exercising discipline is when "pastors undertake it in their own authority and without submitting the issue to a church for an official vote in a corporate business session," Quarles said. "In 2 Corinthians, Paul says church discipline is exercised by the vote of the majority. It's not something that a pastor who's offended by a deacon can use as a club in his fist."

Further, to be biblical the purpose of discipline must always be redemptive, Quarles said.

Other theologians, historians and pastors interviewed on this topic offered an additional caution.

Discipline is a matter for the local church only, several said. "In the failing of public figures, we can point out where we see those failings and we can decry them. But I can no more tell a public figure's church how to respond to that than I could tell the public figure's therapist how to treat it," said Loyd Allen, professor of church history at Mercer University's school of theology in Atlanta.

"People who have not been in the process with the erring member really don't have a place to stand in prescribing the correction," he added. "It has to do with pastoral care and spiritual care. It's not just a matter of reading the law book. This is a matter of discernment that cannot be done with confidence from the outside."

Mark Johnson, pastor of Midway Baptist Church in Midway, Ky., concurred, pointing to the Apostle Paul's admonition to the church at Corinth as the result of a unique relationship. Paul started the church at Corinth and stayed with the church nearly two years, Johnson noted.

"Paul's advice to the church at Corinth was valid because he knew them intimately and they asked for his advice," he said.