



# Current Thoughts

*From Dwight's Corner*

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## **Discipline of Clergy: A Congregational Trust**

Just like a roller coaster has a collection of ups, downs, turns, twists, and dips, our emotions have been on a roller coaster ride as we watched events involving the Roman Catholic Church unfold over the last few months. We have felt shock, pain, horror, anger, disbelief, and fear while we struggled with how best to manifest Christian compassion and reconciliation in such a broken and imperfect world. Despite our longings for perfect justice and complete reconciliation, both remain beyond our human grasp.

Clergy misconduct is an almost unspeakable violation of trust. Sexual abuse of the most vulnerable is a numbing horror. Yet it is a reality. The resulting loss of trust is evident. And it is not limited to the Roman Catholic Church.

American Baptist clergy are held to a standard of behavior outlined in a Code of Ethics. In addition, there is a clearly delineated Ecclesiastical Process for the Review of Ministerial Standing, adopted nearly ten years ago. It is a sad truth that just about every month, action against clergy using this standard and process occurs.

The Ecclesiastical Process does not take the place of legal action. In certain circumstances, the Process is placed on hold while the legal machinery turns. Foremost among these exceptions are charges involving minors. There is no "confessional privilege" when it comes to the abuse of minors. Whether clergy or lay, it must be reported to the civil authorities.

However, because we are Baptists, there are significant differences from the experience of hierarchical churches (like the Roman Catholics). Most significant among these is that ABC/USA does not ordain or place anyone. Consequently, ABC/USA cannot withdraw ordination or terminate ministry. The most serious consequence of Ecclesiastical Process (it is not a substitute for the legal process) is the withdrawal of recognition of ordination. Neither the Region nor ABC/USA has the power to remove any ministerial leader.

In the final analysis, the local congregation must assume responsibility (and accountability!) for the discipline of its clergy. This places a heavy burden on American Baptist congregations. Congregations cannot avoid or deny the issue.

If this were not enough, we must recognize that misconduct, including sexual misconduct, is not just a clergy issue. It also applies to lay leadership.


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Churches should have an official policy regarding acceptable limits of behavior. This policy should be publicized and used in recruiting volunteers.

Churches should review their insurance coverage for liability in such matters.

Pastors must accept the responsibility to beware of their own behavior, and to lead their church into responsible action to protect the most vulnerable persons.



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