

Addressing moral failures in the church

TRANSCRIPT

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NOTE: This transcript was AI-generated and has not been fully edited.

[00:00:00] **Dr. Mark Turman:** This is the Denison Forum podcast. I'm Dr. Mark Turman, executive director of Denison Forum. Thank you for joining us again, or for the first time, if you're just now discovering this podcast, we're grateful that you're with us and that you're going to join in this conversation. And what we do at the Denison Forum podcast is that we seek to equip people to think biblically, To live holy and to serve redemptively, to help every person in situation, to flourish as much as it can until Jesus comes back.

And we have a sense that you're listening because that resonates with you, that that's something that you value and that you want to be a part of. And we hope that today's conversation will be useful in that way. Today, we're sitting down with our founder and cultural apologist, Dr. Jim Dennison. We're going to cover.

A lot of various topics. Hopefully we're going to talk about clergy abuse scandals and what we need to think about, pray about, and learn from those how disappointing they obviously are to those of us who follow Christ and really hard thing when somebody that you look up to learn from has clay feet and has a significant failure.

We're going to talk about that some and how we need to think well about that. We're going to talk about recent stories in the news, such as 10 commandments being posted in every school building in Louisiana and other States and a couple of other things as well, if we have time. And so we're glad that you're along for the ride with us.

Jim, how are you today?

[00:01:28] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I am well, Mark. Thanks for the privilege of the conversation.

[00:01:31] **Dr. Mark Turman:** We're looking forward to it. Lots of weighty stuff going on. And we want to talk about some of those things, but let's just jump right in. Something you and I've talked about in the past, something that you and I've witnessed at times fairly close up when somebody that is a spiritual faith leader, a church leader ends up with a significant failure.

We often hear this term, a moral failure. And that's an interesting term. I've always thought, you know, that's almost sounds like it's code. We saw a recent example. You and I have. Have a ministry that's based in Dallas and some of the most national newsworthy conversations about popular pastors that we have been aware of for decades now being in situations where they're stepping down or they were required to step down from their places of leadership.

And often this terminology of moral failure in one case described and contrasted with legal. Failure or something doing something illegal. Why do you think we use this term? Is it code for sexual misconduct? What do we mean in the most righteous way that we can explain what the word moral failure may be indicating as a contrast and distinguished from other kinds of failure

[00:02:49] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah, it is an interesting term, something that we haven't really seen in the same kind of frequency as we see it now. I think that may be in part, Mark, but just because social media and digital media make things like this so much more available to the world to know than used to be the case was a day when a church's pastor could step down and others might not ever hear.

The reasons for that, even the most in the congregation wouldn't necessarily know why that would be the case. So there wouldn't be an explanation of that. He would just have resigned rather suddenly or something, and there wouldn't necessarily be a particular category that that would fit into. These days, that's not the case.

If anybody is in any position of influence at all or visibility at all, and they leave that position, people know it. They know it rather quickly, and they want to know why. And so when someone comes along to try to explain all of that, if you're a church leader, kind of the first thing you have to do is make it clear to people that this was not a legal situation.

They didn't steal money from us. They didn't harm somebody in a legal fashion. Nobody's at risk here. In other words that's one of the things I think they almost feel they have a fiduciary responsibility to say. I know when I was pastor of a large church in Dallas, and we had a staff member that had what we call a moral failure, one of the first things our attorneys instructed us to do was to make it very clear to the congregation that this person had not broken the law.

That they're not stolen from people. They had not hurt somebody in a way that was considered illegal. They felt that that was almost a legal requirement for us as an organization relative to possible lawsuits down the way and protecting the organization, but also to make it clear that the individual had not done something on that level.

And so we distinguish moral versus legal. I guess at that point, but I guess another way that that has become, and I think you're right about this kind of a catchphrase. I myself am not aware of a moral failure that didn't involve something sexual. I have not myself seen that I've not seen a

person step down because they were found to be a serial liar or because they were found to have been misrepresenting themselves in a pathological fashion or were found to be in some level of heresy.

That caused them to no longer be able to pastor a church. They'd given up Trinitarian theology or they no longer believed in the virgin birth or something. Anytime I've seen anybody step down that wasn't legal, it usually was sexual.

[00:05:07] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, Jim, do you think this term is ever used in some, we've seen some cases over the last few years where Pastors have stepped down or been asked to step down because of the misuse of power. What they were considered too domineering to at times abusive in their leadership style.

Do you think in some cases people are using this term in that in that way? Do you

[00:05:34] **Dr. Jim Denison:** That's a good question. But when I've seen that done, that's usually been pretty clear. People have been pretty explicit about that. The people I'm thinking about right now, people were willing to go forward and kind of explain their side of it. And they were on the staff of that, or they saw that happen or whatever.

As a pastor, when it was a sexual issue regarding a staff member, I always felt the need to protect the victim in a way that I wouldn't feel so much if a person was being an abusive abusing their power in some way, if they were being angry with staff in some unfair way or something like that. And so I always felt the need to protect the, those that could have been the victims of that individual.

And that's why a blanket, more ambiguous, more amorphous sort of description, like moral failure to me anyway, has been used in that context when maybe it wouldn't be used as much if it was a kind of an authority sort of an issue or something like that. Although it could certainly be the case. We both know of people that have left their positions over We never did know what it was.

I'm thinking of a well known pastor right now that said that he had committed a sin at some point in the previous years that was not illegal, but nonetheless was sinful and was stepping down and didn't say what that was. And so perhaps it wouldn't have to be something involving sexual relationships, but my guess is most of the time when they use moral failure, that's what they're covering for as much to protect the victim or possible victims.

You know, as the perpetrator,

[00:06:51] **Dr. Mark Turman:** So, so is it helpful in any way do you think to talk about this terminology? And we'll move on in just a moment past this, but that when we talk about moral

failure, we're somehow talking about character as opposed to capacity. Where, you know, certainly church leaders are sometimes removed from their positions or they step down because. They, they didn't do anything necessarily sinful that they just made a bad decision or they ended up not having the capacity, you know, maybe it was discovered over a period of time of, you know, this person really just doesn't have a gift to preach well. Or they can't administrate effectively. They can't hire, manage staff or volunteers in an effective way.

We would, we would call those, I think failures of capacity or qualification or skill. And this moral area seems to be more in the line of what we would call spiritual character. Is that, do you think that is in any way helpful to talk about it that way?

[00:07:55] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I do, I think I haven't seen that distinction, Mark, but I think that's well said character versus capacity, as you know, having pastored churches as well over the years, large churches that if it's a capacity issue, it's usually handled in ways that are not as damaging to that person's career. It's not really their fault if they are just at a place where they're no longer able to be effective.

And hopefully they could be effective in a different situation, in a different setting. I remember a staff member I worked with in one church. He was a youth minister and just was not able to be successful in that space. And we gave him opportunity to resign. Gave him, actually helped him financially to go back to school and do some things.

He wound up becoming a counselor and was very, very successful and just thrived in that sort of a space. But he just was kind of in over his head. For more UN videos visit www.un.org As a youth minister in the setting where he was so we wouldn't have ever called that a moral failure He'd done nothing wrong.

It was just not a fit It just wasn't a good place for him long term to be in every profession There are times like that people go to medical school and they come out and decide they just really don't want to practice As they thought they did or they're they passed the bar But then discover they really don't like trial law or whatever it might be or they're just not as good at it as they hope To be usually we handle those things differently than that Give them opportunity to go someplace else.

If somebody has a moral failure on their, on their record as a minister, that's pretty career ending typically, or at the very least, there's a whole lot of rehabilitation on the other side of that. I think of one particular well known pastor who admitted an affair. with an individual with whom he had been working.

He admitted that to his wife, to his church. He resigned. He did all of that proactively and was outside of vocational ministry for about 20 years. And then a church came to him and appealed

to him to come and work with them. And he said he wasn't qualified to do that, that he had disqualified himself.

They felt that over those years that he had been so repentant and he had worked so hard to be rehabilitative in his life. And his reputation and they said we're broken people and you're broken as well. And it turned out to be a really good fit toward the end of his of his career, but it was a long process for what was reported to be a one time event with one specific individual, which is still sinful, of course, but that he proactively admitted to his wife.

He wasn't caught. He told that to the church, and nonetheless, that was pretty career ending for him. I would think if it's a moral failure, a church shouldn't handle it. If it's character versus capacity, capacity shouldn't be handled. In a way that could be career ending to the degree that, that the character perhaps could be,

[00:10:22] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Let's go down that road of, of disqualification. We know that Paul writes of this under the direction of the Holy Spirit to the Corinthian church. Paul says, you know, that he buffets or works hard to discipline and contain his body, he says very explicitly his life so that he is not disqualified.

This often comes up in this conversation. You and I were reading a story even in the, you know, another story, unfortunately, even today of a ministry leader who in the explanation to the church, Hey, this person has confessed this to us, but they are now disqualified from their place of service.

Do you think that, that that's an appropriate thing? What it kind of goes to a related question that always comes up in this, is should we be distinguishing different kinds of sin? And you know, you'll hear people say we're all sinners, which is true, including all spiritual leaders. We all have failures.

We all are, are tempted in a little bit later, maybe we can get to a conversation about some of the unique temptations that pastors and church leaders face that may be different. But it's is there a sense in which a person can be permanently disqualified from service or some places of service, people often bring up the example of King David in the old Testament in this vein, and they're like, David didn't lose his kingship over his.

Moral failure with Bathsheba and the killing of Uriah. That really probably should not be the standard exactly that we would use. Probably

that would not be the bar that we would probably use. There are some very unique circumstances in that whole context. But how do you, how do you walk through some of that issue of disqualification and again, coming off the story you just described, is there a path back?

And what, what kinds of things should be included in that?

[00:12:13] **Dr. Jim Denison:** great question. I'm not as clear in my own mind as some appear to be that there are some specific sins that immediately and permanently disqualify a person from particular kinds of ministry biblically speaking, I mean, I've, I've seen the argument that if a pastor, for instance, has an affair, he's no longer the husband of one wife. And in that context, he can no longer be qualified to be a pastor. I've seen that argument made. That's the only exegetical argument I'm aware of that anybody has made that would say that let's just use the example of a pastor having an affair. Let's let's work in that context. Most of the time. That's usually what we're talking about when we're talking about moral failure.

Almost always that is what we're describing. It can be pornography. It can be even a pornography addiction, I suppose. If it were involving underage, it would be legal. It just wouldn't be moral. That would be a very different thing, horrifically so. And so probably we're talking about a consensual affair.

Almost always that's the case. In my experience, that's been the case. What we've had this to deal with in churches over the years on some level of consent in that in that relationship, I myself am not as convinced that the husband of one wife phrase applies directly to that issue and I therefore myself, Mark, don't know of a biblical text that is the black and white clear cut answer to that question.

Here is a sin that he committed and because he or she committed sin X verse Y means that conclusion Z is they can no longer be involved in ministry. What do we even mean by ministry? Does that mean on a church staff? Does that mean they can never lead a Bible study in their home? Does that mean they can never share their faith?

Does that mean they can't be active in some congregation? And because that's ministry, they can't sing in a choir. What do we mean even by that? What are we talking about in terms of ministry? It seems to me that the references that Paul makes in 1st to the person who was involved in that horrific sexual immorality, but then they were repentant and had some 1st Corinthians 5 and then by 2nd Corinthians 2, Paul is counseling the church to bring them back into the church and to rehabilitate their relationship on the basis of their repentance.

And that wasn't a vocational minister, not that they really had vocational ministers in that day and time, but it's a pattern nonetheless. They would say that if there's been repentance, if there's been public almost rehabilitation and accountability, that at least using that as an example and as a referent, that a person would not be disqualified.

From ministry person I mentioned before that was out of vocational ministry for so long had a very effective last season of ministry. I think it would seem to a lot of us on the other side of

Rehabilitation and accountability and all of that and so i'm not myself persuaded That there is a moral failure that permanently just by definition disqualifies a person forever from ministry I don't know if that's what the church that was in the news today meant by that or more that he could no longer be On our staff now By virtue of this.

I, I don't know. I, I, the text, the news story wasn't that specific. Church wasn't that specific. I wouldn't myself think that. Now, if it's legal, that's different. That'd be a very different set of circumstances. But, if it's a moral failure in the sense of an adulterous relationship I don't know that biblically that is, that is, By itself, permanently disqualifying, and I certainly don't mean on any level to justify that behavior or to say it's anything less than horrendous and horrific in so many ways and so demeaning to the body of Christ.

I just don't know that there's an exegetical case that that is therefore by definition disqualifying

[00:15:43] **Dr. Mark Turman:** so, so speaking from a somewhat of an exegetical perspective is the example and testimony of the Apostle Paul or in the case of Peter, do either, either of those examples. In any way, speak into this issue. We know that Peter was this inner circle disciple, and he's the one that denies Jesus three times.

We read this very interesting passage in Galatians where Peter decides to become a hypocrite basically where for a season of time, he realizes and understands that the gospel is for everybody, Jew and Gentile alike. And he is. exercising that experience of prayer, apparently in a very emotional and powerful and wonderful way.

And then some people that he's concerned about impressing come along from Jerusalem and he pulls back and starts to act like that. He doesn't believe that anymore. And there's this very interesting passage where it says that Paul challenged him to his face. So you have that. And then of course you have the apostle Paul's story of.

Not only persecuting, but arresting and even at least affirming, if not participating directly in the murder of early Christians. And he talks about that even to his last letter. He talks about the testimony that he is the chief of sinners. And yet, next to Jesus, he's the greatest church planter we know.

Do either of those stories weigh into this idea of restoration? Let

[00:17:11] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah, with Paul's, the way I've seen that handled, and I think I would agree with this, that's Paul prior to Christ. That's his life prior to the Holy Spirit alive in his, in his life. And so, what he had done prior to his conversion might not be relevant to this conversation. We're talking more about a believer, somebody who is actually in a pastoral ministry who has a moral failure.

And that would be different from a pre conversion sort of, sort of story. And the same with Peter's denials of Christ in that that's pre Pentecost. We don't, it's a good question as to Paul, Peter's experience with the Holy Spirit prior to Pentecost is another conversation, but at the very least, he was filled with the spirit of Pentecost as we know, when you go forward from there.

So the one that I've seen used and you mentioned it that comes closest, I think to be an out being analogous to this is the Galatian situation where you have Peter post Pentecost and you have Paul post conversion. It's not a moral failure in the sense we're describing moral failure today, but certainly a failure of courage, certainly a failure of principle, certainly on some level a very very damaging Failure on Peter's part that Paul chastises him for.

We don't, in the text, know how Peter responds to that. The text doesn't come along to share with us Peter's repentance and accountability and rehabilitation, anything that would come on the other side of all of that. And so if you want to, and then if you want to do some chronologies, it would seem 1 and 2 Peter were written after the fact of that encounter, probably.

And if we go with early church testimony of Peter being crucified upside down, because he wouldn't deny his Lord, then it would certainly seem that Peter's failure as recorded in Galatians was not career ending. Did not keep the Holy Spirit from being able to continue to use him and and inspire him Even to write two letters of scripture And so that would be the best example I know of of somebody having a pretty public In a sense moral failure and still being usable by the Holy Spirit

[00:19:06] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, lots of, just lots of stuff to think about. And and I think it is it Paul's later writings in the pastoral epistles, where he basically says if a person's a person's accountability should be as public as their sin is something along those lines. He says that, you know, tell it to the church so that people will be warned.

We'll get into that topic in a minute, in a moment, but let, let me go one more question. I don't think that I've ever had this conversation with you, which is. You may have been at some point involved in a restoration process with somebody whether you were or you weren't. I can imagine a, a, a spiritual leader, a church leader, an elder, a deacon.

I can imagine people listening to this podcast going, okay, I need to help this person who has confessed or has been found to be in a a moral failure, and I want to help to restore them and to reclaim them. What kinds of things, if you, if you were set, if somebody said to you, Jim, map this out for us, what should this process look like?

What should it include? What, what first comes to mind? What kinds of things do you think you would put into that kind of a process?

[00:20:17] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I have been in those positions a few times as a pastor with staff members where they had a moral failure and I was part of the process of answering your question of deciding what we're going to do and how we're going to do this going forward. The first thing that we did was get professional help. Number one, I'm not a counselor as a professional.

And as we all know, there are specialties even within counseling. And we enlisted the help of marriage and family counselors who had specialty in this space. And if a person doesn't have the means to hire that often, there are those that would be willing to help on a volunteer basis, or even members of your church, perhaps, or community that could offer some level of advice, but we got their guidance.

I'm thinking right now of one particular individual that was found to be engaged in use of pornography, even on his church computer during office hours. And so the first thing we did was bring a coun when we discovered that, the first he, he resigned immediately from his position. The first thing we did was bring a counselor in because now we wanted to try to save the marriage first.

The wife did not know. And so the counselor helped all of that process of, of him telling her and helping them create a pathway of moving forward relative to long process, obviously, of healing and trust building and all the things that you would imagine inside all of that. And then second, we had legal help in terms of what we should and should not tell the congregation.

about what had just happened, what had transpired, and the reason this person was no longer on our staff. My proclivity is always to give the story no place to go, to tell everybody everything you can. Our attorneys cautioned us that first of all, and it depends on your own church's governance, I suppose, but in our setting, the pastor was the only person who was hired by the congregation and therefore the only person the congregation could fire, could vote off of the position.

Everybody else was hired and fired by the personnel committee. And so legally we were not, according to our attorneys we did not owe an explanation to anybody other than the personnel committee and probably legally should not go past that. At some point, the staff member could sue us for libel or slander if we went past what our governance guided us to do relative to a personnel matter, such as this.

So if it's a church staff, there's a personnel involvement in this, and you'd want some legal help to help guide you through the process. And that a third piece has to do with protecting victims. Again, in this particular case, it was an individual with pornography. Another person I'm thinking about, it was a relationship with somebody in the choir.

And part of the reason we kept that anonymous was that people we felt would pretty quickly know who that person was. And we felt that it was not entirely consensual. We felt that in fact this individual was very much misusing his position relative to his relationship with this individual and we wanted to protect her.

And so we chose not to make public his story on a level that would cause people to know that it was sexual because probably she would be, we thought, be victimized by that. And so we had to think about what could best protect her as well. The fourth piece of this, Mark, has to do with protecting the reputation and the truthfulness of the leadership of the church.

very much. At some point we as pastors and we as leaders have our credibility on the line in terms of how we're managing and handling these things. We had a particular situation with one church I was pastoring where there was one individual that was just not working. It just was not a fit. It wasn't a moral failure.

It was the, it was the capacity versus character. And we gave him an opportunity to resign, which he did. We asked him how he wanted us to tell the story. And what he asked us to tell was truthful. It wasn't the entire truth, but it was truthful. And so we chose to share that. And then we found out after the fact that he was lying. about the reasons for which he left the church and created horrible animosity among some in the music ministry toward me, toward our leadership as in a church. And it was a massive issue for us. It was a massive credibility issue. And because we didn't make personnel matters public, we chose not. To fight back by telling the whole story.

We just had to literally withstand it. And to this day, I'm sure there are people that think I lied and we lied because they believed his side of the story. We didn't tell our side of the story. We just chose. And the reason we chose not to do that was for the sake of the other staff. Because our principle was we don't make personal matters public.

We just don't do that. That stops with the personnel committee. Had we done that for our sake with him, we felt the other staff, the other 40 something staff members, would have felt that we would throw them under the bus, as it were, as well. And we chose not to do that. And sometimes you just get in really tough positions there.

So, but that's a fourth piece, is how do you protect your own credibility as a leader, as a, as a, from relative to your own character, and your own your own capacities as a minister as well. There's a lot involved. You know, this is what I'm saying and getting help, getting expert help is, I think, a really valuable first step.

[00:25:11] **Dr. Mark Turman:** And some of the things that are just inherent in what you were saying is, is that this person this person does forfeit their place of leadership and service, at least

for a time, if not more lengthy than that. And that they, they do, you can forfeit that, that privilege of serving.

[00:25:29] **Dr. Jim Denison:** No doubt.

[00:25:29] **Dr. Mark Turman:** and that, that, that's a starting place for sure.

And

[00:25:32] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah. The only question is whether or not, but it definitely at that moment has to happen.

[00:25:36] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And then like, like I said, lots of prayer and lots and lots of outside wisdom from the body of Christ, not, it's not simply go get a counselor or an attorney. It's that's, that's relying upon the larger body of Christ and their skill sets and their giftedness to bring in those kinds of, of help.

Jim, you recently wrote about this in some ways. And one thing you pointed out was, That some of the stories that we're hearing recently and in the past have involved significant periods of delay, apparently between when the moral failure happened and when it was discovered or confessed and you made an interesting statement that I've just continued to ponder, which is.

The devil will allow you something along the lines of the devil will allow you to think you've gotten away with it so that you, so that he can then leverage it in a greater way later on. Can you kind of unpack that thought a little bit about Hey, you think that you confessed it right, or you think that you covered it up appropriately or that you dealt with it in some way and that.

You are past it. But then there's, there's a later reality that the devil unveils, which is what's gone on in some of these stories. Talk about that a little bit about just how crafty the devil is in that kind of a scenario.

[00:26:57] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah. And we can be paranoid pretty quickly about this if we're not careful. And so You know, you want to know there is grace and grace is greater than all our sin as the scripture, as the song says. But I do think Satan has that strategy. The first church I pastored where we had a lot of staff we had a counselor on our staff who he actually helped us with one of the stories I've been telling relative to a staff member and moral failure and how we're going to respond He was incredibly helpful through that process.

And one of the things he, he cautioned me with this was not to allow the enemy to maximize this in other ways. To in my life, don't let this become so consuming for me that it keeps me from being effective in other places Don't let this metastasize if you can and he said satan's a great economist His metaphor was he likes to throw one rock on the lake and have the ripples touch

every shore I've thought about that over the years and and it takes time for those ripples and the the longer he waits the more the ripples The longer after the rock hits the water the greater the damage as it works And he's willing to do that because what he's after, he plays the long game and he's after the greatest damage to the kingdom of God that he can bring about.

Another analogy goes back to a time when I was pastoring in Atlanta and we were putting Christmas lights up and it became my job to climb up to the ladder, to the top of the ladder to get these lights in a specific spot. And when I got to the top of the ladder, the ladder collapsed and I fell 10 or 12 feet down to the to the to the driveway below.

It was not my best moment. I remember it well. But the higher I was, the more the pain when I felt, right? We think about that in kind of spiritual terms. The further the enemy lets you climb, while you're carrying this burden on your back, while you have this unconfessed sin, this unrepentance, and the secret that you're carrying with you, the further the fall, and the more people you're gonna hurt on the way down, the greater the damage is going to be.

And so all that to say, when the scripture says, be sure your sin will find you out, you're not the exception. There is no no loophole there. If you're hearing a voice thinking, nobody will know. Nobody will be hurt. No one will find out. We'll know where that's coming from. That's not the holy spirit speaking to you And so if you're in this conversation right now, and there's something specific in your life that you're thinking about My advice is to take that immediately to the lord to confess that to him instantly and then ask him For the wisdom of the holy spirit to show you if there's something else you should then do Once you've done that, and there may be, it may be that there's a counselor he'd want you to speak with that.

There are others that he wants you to talk to as well. One of the 12 steps is to make reparations where appropriate. There are times when we can confess sin to others in ways that make us feel better, but to damage them. And so I'm not saying that's an easy simple thing that you therefore make this public to the world.

Sometimes Satan would have you do that and create greater damage for the kingdom. So you'd want some help and wisdom in that space, but at the very least be proactive. Don't hide it in hope, is the point. I've not seen that work out. I'm thinking right now of another well known evangelist who was involved years earlier in sin, and by the time that became public, and, and the story was told, and he, I remember how broken he was the day that he was sharing that, and I remember through tears him saying, I never thought this would happen. Of course he didn't. It's quicksand. Satan draws you in an inch at a time, you know. If you knew this would happen, you'd, of course, you wouldn't do that. But understand that he intends the pain to far outweigh the apparent good, because he hates you. He's never gonna tempt us to do something where the good outweighs the bad, where the pleasure outweighs the pain.

That's never, he's not going to do that. That's not how Satan works. And so if there's not a greater loss on the other side of this, he's not bringing you into that. That's, he wouldn't tempt you in that way. So just know that. If this isn't gonna be a net loss for you in the kingdom, you wouldn't be facing this temptation.

And I understand the sooner you deal with it with the Lord and however God leads the better.

[00:30:53] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. So, so many things to think about here, Jim. And, and we've, I've, I've seen you write and speak on this, that these kinds of failures among leaders we've seen it within the, the clergy abuse scandal within the Catholic church, within the Southern Baptist denomination, within other evangelical groups and broader than that.

Do you think, is this a sign to you that our, our culture has become increasingly more dark and in need of spiritual awakening, or is it just simply a matter of awareness because of the way that communication and media and reporting happens now, do you have any sense that this, that there's always been this kind of disappointing failure, or do you think it is more frequent and an indication of the spiritual darkness of the current climate.

[00:31:43] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I think there's a both and. Some of this obviously goes back to David and Bessie, but even further than that in scripture, obviously. Think about Abraham's sexual immorality, certainly. And, you know, lots of biblical pattern there. And so that's human nature and human nature doesn't change. That's why the Bible is still relevant, because God's nature doesn't change and our nature doesn't change.

So, lust has always been with us, and that's why the Ten Commandments forbids adultery. And Jesus wants to tell you that lust is adultery all, all physical adultery started as lust on some level, and so, that pattern has always been with us, of course. course, but I think the two things that make it different now than used to be the case, one of them is the fact that media and social media makes these things so much more apparent than used to be the case.

So the damage to the church is larger than it perhaps has ever been. But I think in addition to that, with pornography and the easy advent of pornography, I think we're seeing ministers trapped in pornography and oftentimes adultery on the other side of pornography on a way that wasn't the case when pornography was not as digitally available as it is now.

A counselor once told me that pornography is the impastor life, the victimless sin. It's a place where they think they can experience intimacy, where they think they can experience all that perhaps they're not feeling in their lives in other ways, and nobody will ever find out. And no as we all know, pornography is a gateway drug.

It's addictive, it's always going to get worse, and it almost always leads to physical manifestations as well. Something like 70 percent of, I read the other day, of divorces in which there was adultery started with pornography. And so, and that is a new thing. I mean, there was a day when no pastor would typically have access to a Playboy or a Penthouse or something like that.

He wouldn't go into a store and buy it from a 7 Eleven or something like that. But the fact that it's so available, I think has created a whole new set of issues for pastors. I remember Mark teaching a men's Bible study at one church and they had like 300 men there. And we had a counselor on our staff who wanted me to spend some time talking to these guys about pornography.

And so he did a not a raise your hand thing, but just a an anonymous survey asking them if they had looked at pornographic material in the last month and 70 percent said yes.

[00:33:57] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Wow.

[00:33:58] **Dr. Jim Denison:** And these were men getting up at six in the morning to come to a Bible study in my church and 70 percent said that they had looked at pornography in the previous month.

And these are the good guys, you know? And so I do think that's new relative to what has been the case previous to to digital technology.

[00:34:17] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And, and it's something that we have to get aware of and that we have to build protections for that that the devil is enormously powerful and crafty in his ways of appearing as, as the Bible says, an angel of light. Jim, do you think when it, when it comes to spiritual teachers pastors, other church leaders, do you think there are some unique temptations that they face that Maybe the typical believer in the pew doesn't face.

[00:34:47] **Dr. Jim Denison:** A good question. Yeah. I'm thinking, go ahead. I'm sorry.

[00:34:51] **Dr. Mark Turman:** yeah, I just and kind of related to that, you know, like I said, this is so, it's so damaging to the witness of the church out among the unbelieving community. It's so demoralizing to people inside the church who have looked to these leaders. And thousands, I mean, thousands of people, if not hundreds of thousands in some cases, you know, and, and people in the church start wondering, you know, does that mean that all of their ministry is disqualified?

All the things, all the sermons they preached, all the lessons they taught, all the ministry that they did is all of that completely, you know, null and void now. And I've, I've been thinking recently in the last number of weeks, just about how celebrity in our culture is something that's so sought

after, but so, counter to so much of the humility that we see in scripture that we're called to live out.

And yet we, in some ways have set up a system where people can become quote unquote celebrities in the spiritual religious church world. And in some ways seems to set them up for failure or for larger failure. If you might say it that way. Is there, do you think there's something unique about that?

I know, I remember Jesus saying just before he goes in the garden of Yosemite that, you know, the devil will strike the shepherd and the sheep will scatter. Is there. Is there a phenomenon or principle there that we need to understand?

[00:36:13] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Counselor once said to me, if it's a preacher, it's sex. If it's a doctor, it's drugs. If it's a lawyer, it's alcohol had been his experience. And so I asked him to unpack that. And he said Satan tempts us in two points. First of all, in ways that are most lined up with our needs and pastors tend to be relational people by nature in ways, and we have relational sin available to us.

In a way that isn't always the case in every profession, where people come to us for counseling, where people are in need or in hurt or whatever, and they're wounded and they're vulnerable, and we're, and we're needy people as well, and we feel unappreciated or underappreciated or whatever, and so you felt like because we're relational by nature and we do relational work, relational sin.

Is going to be more the case for us whereas with doctors they have more They have drugs available to them and he felt like at least in his experience In the legal profession alcohol was a pretty common part of the of the life of that career At least as he had seen it and so that was his shorthand So one piece had to do with how we're wired The other piece said as he said had to do with what most disqualifies you to continue to do what you do You would hire a lawyer who'd had an affair.

You'd have a hard time hiring a lawyer who was an alcoholic You'd hire a doctor who had had an affair, but probably not a doctor who was on drugs. A pastor can have an alcohol problem. A pastor could have a drug abuse problem. A pastor could even have perhaps stolen funds and not be as disqualified from ministry as if a pastor has an affair. And Satan knows all of that. And so he likes to tempt us at the places where we're weakest, but also at the places where the, the, the sin is going to be most damaging. And for pastors, I think relationships really kind of fit into that category. So I think my friend was right in in a shorthand sort of a sense

[00:38:05] **Dr. Mark Turman:** So, even in another related question, which even in the last few days another one of these stories church was trying to communicate to its members. What had

happened in the, in the best ways, most redemptive way possible. But one of the things that this particular church did was they encouraged their members to not talk about this.

And they've gotten some pushback pretty hard on that. What is your advice to church members if they're one of their spiritual leaders becomes involved in this kind of a failure? Is it something you, we just don't talk about that. What are, what's the, the wisdom in that? There obviously would have to be, I would think, a temptation for any of us, all of us, to become involved in gossip and in rumor and in speculation.

I think that's probably what the church was trying to warn people about, that we just, in our human nature, are drawn to drama. And we're drawn in stories like this to speculation. I think that's probably what the church was trying to get in front of and to try to stop from making the situation worse.

But is it one of those things that no, we've been told to not speak. So we're not going to speak. Is there ever a time when church members should speak to each other or in other ways about this? What are your thoughts?

[00:39:33] **Dr. Jim Denison:** You know the first thing I'm and I wanted that too when I read that report as well because I've not seen that said in other settings I've not seen the church handle it quite that way at least that I was aware of and I thought back of my experience as a pastor as well I felt like the first thing that I owed the church if there was a moral failure on our staff was for them to know that they were safe in other words is could this have happened to your daughters?

To your granddaughter were, were your, were your kids safe here at the church? Were your were your families, were your wives or your husbands or whatever the situation might be? Were they safe here at the church? And, and I think you owe them that at the very least. I think you owe them at the very least to know, is this legal or not?

Was there, were there laws broken here? Or not because they're, I mean, they're contributors to this ministry. They are, they're shareholders in this enterprise as it were, and it felt like they're owed at least that. And so I would want to say laws were not broken if they were not, nothing illegal happened here.

And I would also want to say as best we know, the story, you are safe. There's no other, no other shoes are going to drop here. This is, this is this is a contained situation and you don't have to be wondering about your wives or your families to the degree you can't say that. I think they're owed that.

They're owed to know that this is a safe place. You can come back next Sunday and this is a safe place. Beyond that, I think what we're asking them to do is to pray for the individuals involved and for our for that individual, for our leadership, for our congregation and second guard your witness. One of the ways Satan loves to use things like that is to cause slander and gossip to, again, make more ripples off of the one rock in the, in the lake here. Matthew 18, 15, Jesus says, If your brother sins against you, go to him. If you won't hear, you bring along to earth your others. If you won't hear them, you bring it to the church.

But that's if your brother sins against you. Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, If you sin against your brother, Leave your gift at the altar and go be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your gift. In both cases, you either sinned or you were sinned against. Only in a peripheral sense was the church sinned against.

By this individual I assume at least the vast majority of them unless they were personally engaged in this And so I would think in concentric circles if for those that were closest to this individual Maybe people that were in his specific ministry people that were closest to his to his at his work as a vocational minister They would be owed.

I think a higher level of pastoral care and concern you were sinned against on some level here and Matthew 18, 15. So we want to come and talk with you. We want to give you a chance to talk to us. We want to give you a chance to ask questions that we'll answer as best we can. We want to pastor you through this.

The further you get out from it being a Matthew 18, 15, where you were sent against the less talking about this is redemptive. And the more it becomes gossip and slander, and the more it spreads this, it's throwing water on a grease fire. It's making this thing even worse in the community and a black eye for the church now that's, oh, that's that church that had that happen there sort of a thing.

You know? So I'm thinking in concentric circles about what I'm asking people to do as they're engaged in all this sort of thing. Again, you wanna be wise as servants, as well as in the sin does in this

[00:42:44] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, it's such a good word that goes down that line of both thinking biblically and acting redemptively, and to ask yourself both of those questions, you know, am I what's going on? Am I thinking about this in a, in a way that aligns with the truth of scripture? And then am I acting upon this in a way that is redemptive to everybody and everything that's involved?

And sometimes that urge to, to talk, to speculate, to participate in gossip or rumor, it's very strong and something that the Bible warns us about. And. These kind of situations can have

increased ripples. As you said. Jim, we have we have a few more minutes. We don't have to run off just yet, but I wanted to talk to you about a kind of a completely different topic in some ways, which is in the recent news.

There have been stories about the state of Louisiana and potentially other states putting into their schools and other public buildings Expressions of the 10 commandments and a lot of conversation around this, both inside the Christian community and outside the Christian community. It's likely to be something that continues to grow in some way.

Just wanted to get some of your thoughts and discuss with you for a few minutes, about the idea. It goes to, obviously this connects to the conversation about the United States being a Christian nation. It goes to questions of separation of church and state. It goes to a lot of different ideas. But let's just start off with is it a good idea for Christians to advocate that we have the 10 commandments?

I I got, let me give you a context for this. So I got to help plant a church in the North Dallas area. And when we were building our first building, one of our charter members said we would like to put something special at the front door. And I said what are you thinking? And they said we found a person who engraves carved stone.

And he has he has engraved the 10 commandments on two large pieces of stone. And we would like to put them in the wall leading to the front door. And ultimately that conversation resulted. That's what we did. In the years later, I had people say okay why did you choose that passage instead of something out of the new Testament?

[00:44:59] **Dr. Jim Denison:** to be attitudes as, yeah.

[00:45:01] **Dr. Mark Turman:** yeah, why you, there's a whole lot of passages that you could have chosen. And as I thought more about it, I thought there probably could have been some other better choices maybe for the front door of your church. Number one, what do you think is driving this? And do you, what do you think are the pros and cons?

Maybe that's a better way of saying it.

[00:45:18] **Dr. Jim Denison:** First of all, I'm for the 10 Commandments, I wanna, I wanna go on record here I am. I'm in favor of them,

[00:45:23] **Dr. Mark Turman:** That's a good thing for us to say right off.

[00:45:25] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah. I, I, and I can even name them. I read the other day, only 14 percent of Americans can name all 10 commandments. And I at least can do that. I at least can name them. I'm, I'm happy to be able to tell you.

Living by them is another story, right? It's one thing to say them, it's another to do them. And so, that's a different subject, but I, I'm, I'm in favor of them. I think they're, they're, they're great. And I think they are perennially valuable human nature doesn't change. Scripture is just as relevant as it ever was just from a biblical interpretation standpoint.

And as you know, Mark, and we've talked about these, every law in the old Testament that's renewed as a law in the new Testament pertains to force of law. If it doesn't, it retains the force of principle as opposed to a law, kosher dietary laws. Are in the new testament principles. God cares about your body.

Ten commandments every one of them is specifically renewed in the new testament as a law at some place So I think they're still lost. I think the ten commandments are still are still commandments They're not suggestions and I think they're just as relevant today as they ever were And so I would first of all before them I would second of all say that they're just as relevant today as they were when they came down from mount sinai And so I wouldn't think we're having a conversation about some outdated You piece of literature or something that is being foisted on us in some way.

So really the why and the road here, and you know, we know this, but I'll just say it is, is this an historic expression or a religious expression? It's being, it's being defended as an historic expression in Louisiana, in Oklahoma, some of the legislation that's being drafted in Texas, the, the logic, the argument is that the 10 commandments are a critical part of America's history.

That have been overlooked in recent years. That a lot of our students don't know and they should. That we wouldn't have a country without these. And so, knowing them, knowing what they, what they contain, is critical to understanding America's jurisprudence, to understanding our culture, to understanding our history.

And so that's why we're talking about putting them in schools as opposed to post offices or some other visible place. Because it's a part of, it's a neglected part of our history. That needs to be displayed and needs to be made public regardless of your religious beliefs or convictions. History is history.

I mean the facts are the facts here. It is what it is. The other side is to say no, this is a preferential expression of one specific religious conviction and is therefore a violation of the Establishment Clause. It says Congress shall not establish any specific religion. We're, we're giving preference to Jewish and Christian faith here.

This didn't come from the Quran. These aren't expressions of the four noble truths and the eightfold noble path of Buddhism. This is, and if we're going to do this, then we have to also put the four noble truths and eightfold noble path. And we also have to put up passages from the

Quran. And, you know, we also have to do things that are fair to every, and once you start doing that, get, you run out of walls.

When you start putting up everything that every possible religion could want you to put that would be representative of their beliefs as well. So it becomes a practical impossibility and then every one of them is a violation of the Establishment Clause. And so this is the wrong thing to do because it's giving special preference to one specific religion.

It's the pushback, obviously. And then along with that, many are saying this is a step toward Christian nationalism. That even though the The historical argument behind this doesn't say that. I've not seen anything in Louisiana or Oklahoma or Texas that is using language alike. America was founded as a Christian nation, and therefore having the Ten Commandments in schools is an expression of our founding mission.

I've not seen that. I haven't read all that I could read about all that, but I haven't seen that in the reporting of this. But people are connecting the dots. And they're saying whether they say that or not, that's what's behind this. And they look at some of the people that are advocating this and they claim that they themselves and other settings have been making statements like that, that America was founded to be a Christian nation, that it needs to return to being a Christian nation, that Christianity should receive preferential treatment in the public square.

And so you're seeing all of that as well. The Christian nationalism piece of it. I can't read minds. I can't impugn motives here. So i'm not going to do the Christian nationalism piece of it. I don't know. If that's behind this or not, if that's what is intended. And if some other shoe was going to drop down the way, once they get the nose of the camel in the tent and all of that, I would look at it purely in the context of history versus establishment of a religion.

I think that you can do that on the merits here, just based on the words of the 10 commandments themselves. And this is where I'm going to get us some big trouble. You may want to come back and edit this out later. I don't know.

[00:49:48] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Okay. I'll take

[00:49:50] **Dr. Jim Denison:** I myself, yeah, I will blame you. You're the host of this, of this, of this. So this is going to be worthwhile, Mark, what I'm about to say here, but, and I, I am for the 10 commandments.

I want everybody to know them. We'll want them to believe them. We'll want us to live by them, man. If we live by the 10 commandments, how different would America be? Right. I absolutely agree that kids should know the 10 commandments. That they should understand them. They should memorize them. They should live by them.

I'm for all of that. I don't see how Placing the ten commandments at a public school is not a religious expression This isn't a portrait of george, washington. This isn't thomas paine's common sense This says there is no god, but god and that's where we start here, right? You shall not take the name of the lord your god in vain.

I mean that's about as religious as it gets You And so I don't see how anybody would see the Ten Commandments on a wall and not have the right to say that's a religious expression. Because that's just what they are. That's the heart of at least what the first half of them is. You can get to the second half and that doesn't have to be religious, not to you know, murder and adultery and theft and coveting.

Those are not necessarily religious expressions, but the first three, especially, are without question a religious expression. A Buddhist wouldn't say it that way. A Muslim wouldn't necessarily put it that way, might or might not. Certainly a Hindu would not, an agnostic certainly would not, an atheist certainly would not, would not agree with that those are not religious expressions.

So to me, that's the hard part about the argument that this is purely an historic treatment that is being advocated here because the content itself to me seems to be. Too religious for that to be the case and does feel to me to be a violation of the establishment clause, even though, as I said, I am for the 10 commandments and I would love everybody to know them and live by them.

It's hard for me to see that that's not an expression or an establishment of religion.

[00:51:48] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, I can understand that. And at the same time, I think there is listening to you kind of describe this is that there is some real validity to. Understanding the historical influence of the Ten Commandments on the history of our country, on the founding of our country, and maybe a better way to think about this is Not we need a monument of some kind or a plaque of some kind in a school or a classroom, but maybe a curriculum that talks about the faith and spiritual influences that, that guided and drove and informed the people who did establish our country.

They did have beliefs. They weren't all Christian. But they did have belief. And there was this sense in many ways anchored in the 10 commandments, or at least in some of the 10 commandments, what you've spoken about before, which is this idea of a consensual morality, whether you were a person of faith or not, you had some idea of a general framework of agreed upon morality, such as, It's not good to murder the people you don't agree with, or it's not good to lie as a strategy. And there was, and we would hope there would continue to be even a resurgence of some of those ideas of fundamental consensual reality or morality as a culture. And that there's a lot that could be taught and should be taught about that.

[00:53:21] **Dr. Jim Denison:** no

[00:53:21] **Dr. Mark Turman:** so maybe the better way is not advocating for a plaque or a monument where each of the commandments is dictated, but more for the harder work of developing a curriculum that explores and explains and talks about that as a part of the creation of our country and the development of our country, it, it wasn't something that just happened back in, you know, 1774, it's still a part of our journey.

Right?

[00:53:47] **Dr. Jim Denison:** it is. And where that's been done, it's passed the legal test that I'm aware of. I know of a number of groups that have put together curriculum like that in public schools and they've been contested of course. Freedom from Religion Foundation and others have pushed back but they've stood the test because of what you just said.

This is a fact of our history and it's a fact that's been overlooked. So as long as it's taught as history, so long as it's taught as sociology, then of course that is not establishing a specific religion. If you can't mention religion without establishing religion, it's going to be very difficult to talk about America on any level.

Now you can't talk about Judaism. You can't talk about Islam. You can't talk about Hinduism. How would you explain 9 11 and not talk about Islam and Wahhabi Islam and the role that it played in that if you're, if by doing that, you're establishing Islam by virtue of having talked about the role that Islam played, or at least Wahhabi Islam did, extremist Islam did played in, in, at that point, they're just too much of pretty much any nation's history, which can't be told apart from religious expressions.

Whatever that nation might be, whatever that religious expression might be. So if you're establishing a religion by mentioning it. Then it's going to be awfully hard to do history or sociology or any kind of education. The balance is going to come at the point of motive and at the point of Of outcome and so if i'm doing this as a means to evangelizing if i'm doing this as a means to On some level offering preferential Sort of defense of that religion.

That's a different thing At that point I would understand If I were an agnostic or an atheist, I wouldn't understand. Or if I were a Baptist in Hawaii and Buddhism or being taught in preferential way, and my kids were in public schools in, in Hawaii, and they're learning about the influence of Buddhism and the history of Hawaii, which they should.

But then they're being, they're being taught how to be Buddhist and they're being taught how to build altars at home and how to practice Buddhism in public schools, I would be frustrated about

that as a parent. Just as an agnostic would be if it were a Baptist setting or whatnot. And so that's going to be the balance and you're always going to have that balance.

But if you're afraid of crossing that line and therefore don't take the first step, hard to do education. If we can't mention religion without establishing religion and that certainly is not what the founders meant. I think Ronald Reagan was right when he said the founders were far more concerned about protecting religion from the state than the state from religion.

I think he's exactly right about that. They weren't nearly as worried, I think, about the church having too much influence in the state as to where politics being too influential in the church. And that's typically how that's happened across history. When when the church and state have gotten together, it's usually been to the detriment of the church.

And I remember Chuck Colson, when he was in the Reagan White, or the Nixon White House said that the preachers were the easiest people to influence. He said, you can bring them to the White House, give them a photo op with the president, and they'd do whatever you want. Which was kind of a callous thing to say, but he, that's what he said.

So there's, there's a balance there for the sake of the purity of the church and the witness of the church, just like there is for the sake of the separation of church and state, however you want to understand that.

[00:56:54] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. That's super helpful. And like I said, a lot of nuance in that thought process in that, that understanding. And I I appreciate you explaining it really helpful. Brings a lot of, a lot of clarity to it. I'd love to keep

[00:57:07] **Dr. Jim Denison:** if people don't like my explanation, Mark, that was your fault, by the way. You're the host.

[00:57:11] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. If we,

[00:57:13] **Dr. Jim Denison:** they need to, should I give your email address now? Is now a good time to do that?

[00:57:16] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Right after I give them yours,

[00:57:18] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Oh, I

[00:57:18] **Dr. Mark Turman:** sure, I'm sure they'd much rather hear your have your email address than mine, but as, as we wrap up and as we often do, if you do want to email us, we're happy to hear from you at info at Denison forum. org. And we would be glad to hear your comments and we do respond to them.

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