

Church Leaders Denounce Physical Abuse After Prominent Baptist Says 'Submit'

A growing group of key Southern Baptist leaders are denouncing comments about physical abuse made by Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, more than a decade ago.

Patterson is a formidable Baptist leader, not only heading the seminary but also leading what's known as "the conservative resurgence" in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in the late 1970s and serving as the SBC president in the late 1990s. The SBC has asked him to deliver the keynote sermon at its annual June meeting in Dallas.

Late last week, religion writer Jonathan Merritt discovered a 2000 audio clip in which Patterson recommends that women facing abusive husbands pray for them and submit. "Do what you can at home to be submissive in every way you can and to elevate him," Patterson said.

Patterson also said that divorce is "always wrong counsel" and that he had never counseled anyone to get one. He said there are different levels of abuse and that if serious enough, he might suggest a temporary separation.

On Sunday, Patterson issued a statement saying he has never condoned any kind of abuse. Referencing the clip he said "my suggestion was never that women should stay in the midst of abuse, hoping their husbands would eventually come to Christ. Rather, I was making the application that God often used difficult things that happen to us to produce ultimate good."

Patterson did affirm that he has never recommended divorce. "How could I, as a minister of the gospel?" he said.

Over the weekend and starting this week, key Southern Baptist leaders have denounced the audio clip comments, either directly calling Patterson by name or indirectly by speaking about abuse.

Thom Rainer, the president of Lifeway, issued a statement Monday, citing the comments by Patterson and explaining, "I cannot be silent on the issue of abuse of women ... there is no level or type of abuse of women that is acceptable."

Russell Moore, the president of the Southern Baptist's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission re-tweeted the statement and affirmed "Thom is right. The church should and must be clear on this." Moore said women who are abused should leave their homes and call the police. "The state should prosecute the abuser and the church should discipline him."

Beth Moore, a well-known Southern Baptist Bible study author, and speaker spoke against Patterson's comments without calling him by name. "When we as a church culture demonize divorce as the worst possible outcome—the sin of all sins—we truly have no clue on this ever-loving earth what some people are enduring. We do not submit to abuse," she said.

Southern Baptist pastor J.D. Greear, who will be nominated to serve as SBC president at the June meeting, affirmed a statement by Bruce Ashford, the provost of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Ashford said, "a physically abused woman should separate from her husband and have him put in jail."

Greear also told CBN News, when asked about sexual abuse in a wide-ranging interview on Saturday, that churches must build a culture of transparency. He said victims of abuse must be the church's top priority when handling accusations. "We want to preach grace and mercy to even the perpetrators," he said,

“but the protection of the innocents and protection of the victim is foremost.”

Greear said church leaders must be prepared to go to the authorities when accusations of abuse are made. “It’s not enough to confront the sin in our midst,” he said, “sometimes we have to go to the authorities.”

Ken Hemphill, the other pastor who will be nominated for SBC president in June, told the *Baptist Press* last week that sexual abuse “should never be tolerated or left unpunished,” when asked about the #metoo movement. He has not specifically commented in response to the Patterson clip that re-surfaced, nor has current SBC president Steve Gaines.

Merritt says he knows of other reporters who are investigating Patterson’s background and predicts “This story has legs and is going to stretch on for a long time.” It’s a decisive moment for the SBC, he says, as it has not issued a resolution on domestic abuse since 1979.

“There are questions being asked of the SBC that haven’t been asked in more than a generation,” he noted, “I think we’re just beginning to have a conversation that is going to go on for some time.” {eo}

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