

Has the 'Judgment of God' Fallen on the SBC?

One day after the removal of a prominent seminary president following a series of contentious remarks about women, Southern Baptists have begun a public reckoning.

The forced retirement of Paige Patterson, the president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, has broken a dam of anger, resentment and recrimination both for his comments about abused women as well as apparent efforts by the seminary's trustees to protect his reputation even as they eased him out.

While not discussing Patterson by name, Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, sounded an alarm.

"I have to see it as the judgment of God upon a denomination and the larger evangelical movement for decades of failure in dealing rightly with questions of sexual abuse and misbehavior," Mohler said in an interview with RNS.

Mohler warned that the impact of the #MeToo movement on the denomination was just beginning and that "we're going to discover this problem is far more widespread."

He was referring to comments by Patterson in a 2000 interview and a 2014 sermon in which he boasted that he once advised a woman to stay with her abusive husband and objectified the body of a 16-year-old girl as "built." Both resurfaced in the past few weeks in the media. On Tuesday (May 22), The Washington Post reported that in 2003 Patterson asked a female student not to report an alleged rape to the police and to forgive her assailant.

Patterson, the architect of the conservative takeover of the

Southern Baptist Convention in the early 1980s, is also known for using his position to push back against feminism and the women's movement. He helped reinstate a biblical literalism when it comes to marriage, family and the role of women and helped push an amendment to the denomination's statement of faith that says "a wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband."

Around 3 a.m. Wednesday, after 13 hours of deliberation, Southwestern's board of trustees issued a statement thanking Patterson for his contributions and service to the school over the past 15 years and announcing that it wanted new leadership.

The trustees named Patterson president emeritus, a new post that comes with undisclosed compensation. They allowed him to remain on campus as a theologian-in-residence in a house now under construction.

For some Southern Baptists, that kid-glove treatment for Patterson rankled—especially among a younger generation of pastors who are trying to evangelize to a modern setting.

"I believe a mockery was made, to be honest," said Dean Inserra, 37, pastor of City Church in Tallahassee, Florida. "This was basically an accelerated retirement plan that was already in place before. It's very frustrating. It sends a very poor message, not only to the women of the SBC and of the congregation I pastor and our staff here, but also all other Baptists."

Patterson sounded unapologetic in a letter emailed Wednesday to seminary students and staff, published by the Post. "We are, of course, hurt. But we did not compromise, and we still have our voice to witness," he and his wife, Dorothy, wrote in the email, which the seminary did not release publicly.

Patterson is scheduled to give a keynote sermon to pastors during next month's annual meeting of the Southern Baptist

Convention in Dallas, though many pastors said that is now unlikely. They say Kie Bowman, pastor of Hyde Park Baptist Church and The Quarries Church in Austin, Texas, will likely give the sermon instead.

Southern Baptists have no formal hierarchy. Each church is independent, as are its members. Some expressed fierce loyalty to Patterson.

"To retroactively punish him for remarks he made years ago is unfair," said Chris Thompson, a pastor and former chief of staff for Patterson during his 10 years as president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

"I don't know any pastor, or public speaker for that matter, who would ever want to be subject to someone pulling an audiotape from some archive and having to answer for those words 18 years later. Who's next, is really what my question would be."

Thompson said Patterson's comments to the abused woman reflect a desire—however imperfectly stated—to communicate that the Bible hates divorce.

Southern Baptists do not appear ready to reject the theology of "complementarianism," the idea that, though men and women are equal in worth, men alone should hold leadership roles in the home and in the church.

But many pastors said they thought Patterson's long pattern of belittling or disrespecting women was a mistaken application of biblical teaching.

"Any statement that would seem to affirm a woman remaining in an abusive situation or that would demean or devalue the apparent worth of women is theologically problematic," said Micah Fries, pastor of Brainerd Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

These Southern Baptists say Patterson's understanding of women's roles is culturally anachronistic. Former employees of Southwestern say that one of the first things he did when he arrived on campus in 2003 was to mandate that women wear modest skirts or dresses (except for casual Fridays and in summer).

Patterson also pushed out Hebrew professor Sheri Klouda and church historian Karen Bullock because he does not believe a woman should teach men or interpret Scripture.

Debra Smith, a onetime student at Southwestern who now attends a Southern Baptist church in Georgia, said she has long thought Patterson and other SBC leaders have a warped view of women's roles.

"If church leadership is using the Bible as an excuse to subjugate women and keep them in their place, I think they need to go back and do a reread of Scripture," she said. "Jesus valued women. Jesus protected women. He celebrated women."

Smith said she was grateful that some people are "beginning to speak out."

But, she added, "there are still so many people who don't want to rock the boat and who want to focus on whatever accomplishments they think Patterson and his ilk might have achieved for the convention and his church. They're protecting their own people." {eo2}

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