



THE ETHICS & RELIGIOUS
LIBERTY COMMISSION
OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

May 31, 2021

J.D. Greear
President
Southern Baptist Convention
The Summit Church
Durham, North Carolina

Dear J.D.,

As I said to you the other night, you have my prayers as you go into your last Southern Baptist Convention meeting as president in a historically long—and even more historically accomplished—presidency. One of the great joys of the last eight years has been working alongside you on issues of monumental importance for the witness of the church.

Some of the letter below is almost verbatim what I said to my own board officers last February. As I prepare to transition to my new role of ministry, I feel conscience-bound to put down in print for you what you and I have previously discussed—a matter that, in my opinion, is now a crisis for the Southern Baptist Convention. The crisis is multi-pronged as you and I have discussed, as seen in the blatant, gutter-level racism that has been expressed to me behind closed doors along with the reprehensible treatment of my African-American employees and our African-American seminary professors by figures within the Southern Baptist ecosystem. In this letter, though, I refer specially to the crisis of sexual abuse as it relates to the SBC Executive Committee.

In February of this year, you and I discussed the unquestionable debacle that was the Executive Committee meeting. Not only did this include an absurd and widely ridiculed “task force” report on the entity I serve, but overreach by the Executive Committee related to a number of entities, including the North American Mission

Board and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Behind all of this, though, is the larger question of sexual abuse within our churches, and the spiritual and psychological abuse of sexual abuse survivors by the Executive Committee itself along with a pattern of attempted intimidation of those who speak on such matters.

You know well the obstacles that both you and I faced from figures within the Executive Committee in merely raising questions about sexual abuse, questions compellingly raised by the *Houston Chronicle*, among others. You and I both, in seeking to address this issue—with the full authorization both in terms of entity ministry assignment and direct vote by the messengers to the SBC annual meeting—faced one stonewall after another by leaders within the SBC Executive Committee. Simply speaking to the press or, in your case, reading off the names of churches already identified in the *Houston Chronicle* reporting by Rob Downen—not in your case as indictment, but merely as warranting an examination—resulted in backroom and hallway threats of retribution and intimidation. These included possible attempts to “censure” you to investigations and defunding, and all the rest.

You and I both heard, in closed door meetings, sexual abuse survivors spoken of in terms of “Potiphar’s wife” and other spurious biblical analogies. The conversations in these closed door meetings were far worse than anything Southern Baptists knew—or the outside world could report. And, as you know, this comes on the heels of a track-record of the Executive Committee staff and others referring to victims as “crazy” and, at least in one case, as worse than the sexual predators themselves.

This led to the disastrous move by the Bylaws Work Group to “exonerate” quickly and by fiat churches with credible allegations of negligence and mistreatment of sexual abuse survivors—even leading to a call of apology from an Executive Committee official to a church that had, at the time, a sexual offender on staff. You and I were critical of such moves, believing that they jeopardized not only the gospel witness of the SBC, but also the lives of vulnerable children and others in Southern Baptist churches. Against constant backroom attempts to stop any forward momen-

tum, we were able to get across the finish line some very modest steps toward addressing this crisis in our convention—the Caring Well Challenge along with the Caring Well advisory group, as well as the formation of a credentials committee.

Behind all of this was the undiluted rage that you and I faced from Executive Committee officers—including the then-chairman. This included but was hardly limited to the tense meeting that you, Todd Unzicker, and Phillip Bethancourt from my team had with Mike Stone and Ronnie Floyd in Atlanta in May of 2019. There Stone vigorously insisted on delaying the formation of a credentials committee to assess churches reported to be mishandling sexual abuse. Phillip concluded by telling Stone that the question would not be whether or not Southern Baptists would be presented with a motion in Birmingham for a credentials committee, that we would see to it that such was done regardless. The only question was whether Southern Baptists would see Executive Committee opposition to it.

Stone argued with Bethancourt at that point, suggesting that this approach was “unseemly,” and said that such a move would be rushing the process. The chairman of the Executive Committee did not want to risk “rushing” a process for churches who mishandle abuse, and yet had no trouble leading an effort, in a two-day meeting, in assembling an investigative review of the entity working to address the abuse.

At the convention that year, Southern Baptists did, indeed authorize a Credentials Committee, albeit a weakened version of one. If Stone had been able to delay its formation as he wished, we would be here two years later without even the most minimal mechanism to assess churches mishandling abuse, other than the Bylaws Workgroup. While by no means a definitive solution to this crisis, the committee could at least attempt to make recommendations to the convention outside of the unilateral control of such groups as the Bylaws Work group.

As president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission for the past eight years, I can speak to this directly and personally. The “task force” report initiated in Feb-

ruary 2020 was headed by the then-chairman Mike Stone, who likewise participated in a similar “task force” in Georgia in 2014-15. This was, of course, the second “task force” set up by the Executive Committee in a span of three years. Both allegedly to look into the numbers of churches said to be defunding the Cooperative Program because of the ERLC. The first such task force showed no such defunding, and, as we all know, the most recent investigation relied on fifteen “confidential” state executive directors. More concerning though is that with this most recent “task force” not only did Mike Stone facilitate its creation, but he drove the committee throughout the process and managed the parameters of its scope. This was, of course, after he somehow managed to make himself chair of the committee and with the power to name its membership.

What most Southern Baptists do not know, but you and I do know, is how the issue of sexual abuse lurks just below the surface of so much of the controversy of the last few years.

As you know, the last ERLC National Conference was a piece of the strategy to address, at long last, this crisis head-on, as we focused the conference around questions of sexual abuse. We said from the beginning that we wanted a place for honest dialogue around these issues and that we would not police anyone from speaking what he or she thought or had experienced. At least one invited speaker harshly criticized us—including my entity—for not doing enough on this issue and not handling it the way he thought we should. I invited him, specifically, knowing that he would do so, because I thought his perspective was in good faith and reasonable, that it should be heard and that we could, by hearing that perspective, learn how to do this better. I welcomed that criticism and did indeed learn from it and was, and am, glad the speaker felt the freedom to speak as he did.

The defining moment—as it relates to the past year—of that conference was, of course, the conversation that I had with Rachael Denhollander, the Olympic gymnast, attorney, and advocate for survivors of sexual abuse. Rachael told me hours

before we were to go on stage that she had spoken with an abuse survivor we both know well, and that the survivor had granted permission for Rachael to mention her story as long as I approved of her doing so. I said that I would not at all censor anything that she had to say. That would have been true about anything, but certainly true about this survivor, a person Maria and I love and have walked alongside as she has experienced not only the sexual abuse of her past, but the disparagement and then bullying and intimidation by the SBC Executive Committee.

This survivor attempted to tell her story of abuse, through the channels of the Executive Committee, and her own words were altered by Executive Committee staff to make it seem as though this horrifying experience had been a consensual affair. I saw, first-hand, the sort of abuse this brought upon this survivor, not only on social media and through calls for her firing from her ministry position but even the word “whore” directed to her in a corridor at the Southern Baptist Convention. We saw the spiritual and psychic damage this did to her. As a matter of fact, at that very National Conference where Rachael addressed the matter, Maria and I and many others were ministering by phone to this mistreated and maligned young woman.

Before the conversation happened, I told Executive Committee staff members present, Amy Whitfield and Jonathan Howe, that it was likely that Rachael would address this issue. To be clear, as you know, Whitfield and Howe were, as always, consummate professionals and Christlike believers, who never attempted to in any way stop or alter the conversation in any way.

In the conversation, Denhollander did indeed raise the question of this survivor’s mistreatment by the Executive Committee (along with other instances of church and ministry injustices against those who have lived through abuse). In fact, as I knew then and know far better now, if anything, Rachael downplayed the horror this survivor had experienced, and later would experience, at the hands of the Executive Committee. She relayed through tears her experiences of bullying and intimidation by figures all the way up the org chart at the Executive Committee, culminating in a

financial settlement by the Executive Committee but with a refusal by them to apologize. This survivor asked to speak to the 2021 Executive Committee trustees—secretly in executive session—simply to relay to them what she had experienced, so that such would not happen to any other survivor. She told me that she had the support of the chairman of the board, Rolland Slade, and relayed text messages demonstrating such, but was told that her request had been denied.

The Denhollander moment at the Caring Well Conference enraged certain leaders of the Executive Committee. Phillip Bethancourt and I were called to a meeting with Executive Committee president Ronnie Floyd who told us that “you’re going to have to help me out here” because he was experiencing backlash from his chairman and others over what we had allowed to happen. He said that these trustee leaders were especially upset since the Executive Committee had contributed some money to your efforts with the Sexual Abuse Advisory Group. In actuality, no money from the Executive Committee was used to pay for the conference (which, even had this been the case, would not have stopped us from doing what we believed to be morally right). The financial amount given, \$250,000, was raised repeatedly in that meeting as a reason why it was inexplicable that we would allow Rachael Denhollander to say what she said.

Ronnie’s posture was as one who was himself under fire, but told us that his trustees were not at all happy. That was less than three months before the 2020 Executive Committee meeting where it was made very clear that there would be consequences. As I told both Maria and my trustee officers at the time, the very clear message from this sector of Executive Committee trustees was, “You’ve got a nice little Commission there; it would be a shame if something happened to it.”

Not only that, but it’s noteworthy that the same people enraged by our efforts to combat sexual abuse were also those enraged when you made the common-sense statement to the press that, while you cannot tell a church what to do or with whom to do it, you thought giving a “Defender of the Faith” Award to Paige Patterson—af-

ter his firing by a Southern Baptist entity over issues related to the treatment of vulnerable women—was not a good idea. Ronnie Floyd, and others, told me at that meeting that these trustees were talking of both an “investigative task force” for me and a censure for you. The censure, of course, did not happen. I was told this was because there would not be enough votes for an action that had never happened before.

But the task force did happen, largely because the people raging behind closed doors could couch the proposal in the bureaucratic language of “just asking questions” in ways that could seem to Executive Committee trustees who did not know of such things (probably the vast majority of them) to be non-hostile, at the time.

On the Monday of that meeting, I gave my report before the Cooperative Program subcommittee, and was asked nothing but friendly questions, with no hostile or critical questions at all. This is despite the fact that, as we now know, the decision was made the night before, by the EC trustee officers, to launch this task force. They went into a secret session, without ever talking to you or to me, to form yet another secret task force.

The last time they did this I was “investigated” by the then-president of the Executive Committee who was, at that very time, covering up his own use of pastoral authority to sexually sin. The issues raised with me were why, for instance, I said that prosperity gospel preacher Paula White is a heretic and a huckster not representative of evangelical Christianity and why I did not include “the Bubba crowd” (his words) in my conference programming, since they pay the bills.

This former president is now back in pastoral ministry, in a Southern Baptist church. As you know, I asked Ronnie Floyd if the Executive Committee ever planned to release information beyond the amorphously worded “moral failing” language at the time of his resignation, about whether this former president had abused spiritu-

al and pastoral authority with the woman in question in this incident. I was told that they would not.

Both the first and second “task force” initiatives were, as you and I know, about one thing fundamentally. They know that the headlines will be “Russell Moore and the ERLC Under Investigation for Hundreds of Churches Leaving and Defunding the Convention,” in a way that can both impugn our character and hinder our effectiveness. They also know that when the final report emerges months or a year later, showing the claims false (or avoiding the presenting claims altogether) that there will be no similar press trumpeting those findings. That’s because that’s the point—to keep a cloud over me, and to attempt to get me to self-censor and be silent about these matters. The tactic of “We gave you \$250,000, why did you allow our dirty laundry to be aired?” can then be morphed into, “We control your CP budget; why don’t you play ball?”

And they know that such “investigations” are draining of time, energy, and morale for both me and my entire team—as well as the thousands of Southern Baptists around the country, and Southern Baptist missionaries around the world, who support us. But the strategy is clear—an endless psychological warfare aimed at silencing through intimidation.

And, indeed, if we wish to compare anecdotal accounts, I could marshal thousands of anecdotes of the people—especially young and minority pastors—that I have spent hours talking into staying in cooperation with the SBC when they want to leave. I cannot tell you how many pastors and leaders have told me that they either keep or wish they could keep the word “Baptist” out of the name of their churches, because they feel ashamed. When asked why they are ashamed, the reasons are not—as some might caricature—the “bold” and “uncompromising” doctrinal witness of Southern Baptists in a “darkening culture.” These are doctrinally orthodox and conservative leaders. They are talking about the sort of thing I am discussing here—and they don’t even know a fraction of a fraction of it.

Now, as I said to my trustee officers last year, through all of this I have tried to smile and pretend that everything is alright with me personally and to refrain from revealing the horrific actions you and I have experienced behind the scenes. For one thing, I didn't want to defend myself—as I think Jesus forbids me to do (Matt. 5:11-12; 38-42). And part of it is because I don't want the vast majority of Southern Baptists who are good and godly and seeking to be on mission to grow weary and leave.

In every one of these incidents, some of the people involved will say, “We don't want Dr. Moore (or J.D. Greear) to leave.” And I believe they are telling the truth. They do not want us to leave because they do not want the constituencies to which we speak to leave. What they want is for us to remain silent and to live in psychological terror, to protect them by covering up what they do in darkness, while asking our constituencies to come in and to stay in the SBC.

Everywhere I go—everywhere I go—I am greeted by former Southern Baptists. Almost none of them are angry or bitter. If anything they are nostalgic and want to reminisce with me about words we would share that others in their new church communions wouldn't know—“Lottie Moon” and “Annie Armstrong” and “RAs” and “GAs” and so on. I have had more conversations about “Training Union” and “Centrifuge” after speaking to other denomination's annual meetings than I ever have at our own. They love their Southern Baptist past. That's where they found Jesus, and where they found a way to be on mission.

None of these people, before they left, called the Executive Committee, threatening to defund anything if they didn't get their way. The thousands of young people I encounter on college campuses who are now non-denominational or of another Christian denomination don't do exit interviews with their association Director of Missions. Instead, they just look at the rage and the cover-ups and shrug their shoulders and say, “I guess they don't want people like me.”

In all those situations, I want to scream (and sometimes I have!): “But that’s not who Southern Baptists are! The people in our churches, and the overwhelming majority of pastors, are kind and loving and gospel-anchored and mission-focused. They are not part of all this you have seen!” But my generation—taught implicitly that being Southern Baptist is a kind of moral obligation—is the last for whom that is true. Regardless, that’s not what’s important right now. What’s most important is what happens to vulnerable children and adults in our very own churches.

You and I both know how leadership in the Executive Committee, at the trustee level with Mike Stone and his allies, and at the staff level by former Executive Vice-President Augie Boto, have stonewalled many attempts at reform for the sake of the sexually abused. You know that this has happened even after they have given publicly what appeared at the time to be very good and open statements about the matter. And you know that when their stonewalling has failed, you and I have not called them out publicly on what they did privately. We simply focused on the results, of trying to achieve measures to mitigate sexual abuse.

Now, though, other questions have come to light that demand serious investigation. You and I both know the involvement of Paige and Dorothy Patterson, through their allies, in these tactics of retribution and revenge. Indeed, videos made for the group aligned with Mike Stone and Rod Martin, were geo-tagged to the Pattersons’ home. Websites for their subsidiary groups are demonstrated to have been created by a nativist political group.

We now know that Augie Boto and others, at the very time we were trying to convince them to do anything on this matter of sexual abuse, were colluding with the Pattersons to divert funds from Southwestern Seminary and Baylor University for their own causes, and with appointments on a board enriching those involved by six figure payments every year. We do not know this from anecdotal rumors of some task force; we know this from court documents in the state of Texas.

What we do not know is what the involvement was of SBC Executive Committee attorneys in advising these moves against one of our own entities. What we do not know is what communication the Executive Committee and its trustee leadership have had on matters of intimidating other leaders and entities who are seeking to address sexual abuse from a man who was fired for, among other things, saying that he would “break down” a rape victim, and for making shockingly inappropriate public comments about abuse victims and underage girls.

Alongside this, we have allegations circulating on social media and elsewhere that—even while we were contending with Mr. Boto throughout 2018—that he was testifying personally as a character witness in court for an alleged sexual predator. This charge may or may not be true. I have been asked about it repeatedly and have repeatedly said that surely it couldn’t be. But this certainly warrants finding out and thus either clearing Mr. Boto’s name or in seeing a very disturbing conflict of interest that should have, and never was, disclosed.

What I know, but Southern Baptists do not, is the bullying and intimidation of at least one sexual abuse victim by the SBC Executive Committee and the attempted intimidation of at least one SBC entity president. If Southern Baptists decide that these are the sorts of tactics they want employed, and that the primary problem for them is not sexual predators but those who call for justice against sexual predators, then that is certainly their right. Autonomous churches and the people in them can then decide if that’s what they wish to support. But it is not right for Southern Baptists to vote over and over and over again in their annual meetings for sane, reasonable approaches to this, and other crises, only to see such things frustrated by mafia-level intimidation tactics between meetings.

The tactics are as simple as they are ungodly. They wish to caricature media who report on sexual abuse as biased, sexual abuse victims as, at best, mentally disturbed and, at worst, as sexually-promiscuous sinners, and those who stand with those victims as “liberals” or as dedicated to a “godless and secular MeToo movement.” What

is punished in these circles is asking for accountability for abuse, asking why one leader we once lionized for “biblical conviction” has such reprehensible attitudes about rape and abuse and why another is currently in court on charges, himself, of molestation. We are not allowed to ask why a recent president of the Executive Committee is in the pastorate despite a misuse of spiritual authority and why a high-ranking former member of the Executive Committee is in the press for allegations of a cover-up of sexual abuse at his own church.

At this year’s 2021 Southern Baptist Convention, I had planned to speak to the messengers and ask for an independent third-party investigation of these activities by the SBC Executive Committee, similar to the independent investigation into Ravi Zacharias International Ministries. This outside inquiry would collect and examine whatever documents, records, communications, or other material that might exist revealing any transactions or discussions between Executive Committee trustees, staff, or attorneys with the aforementioned individuals who have been allegedly involved in the financial defrauding of Southern Baptist entities, as related to investigations or intimidations of those calling attention to abuse and related matters.

This past February’s Executive Committee meeting was clarifying for me. My fifteen year-old son—hearing just the hubbub about “investigations” of me—asked whether or not I had had a moral failure. As I told you the other night, I am usually resilient and calm about such things, but I was filled with anger, especially because not only had I not had a moral failure but I knew of the immorality of some of the very people initiating and carrying out the “investigations” meant to cast aspersions on my character. I did what I had never done before and asked him to attend the Executive Committee meeting with me, so that he could see and hear for himself. I’m glad I did. But as I watched his face in that meeting, I concluded that I would never have to answer that question to him again as a result of intimidation by these figures.

Now, for me, that’s simply a matter of a different ministry and the personal grief over almost fifty years of continual Southern Baptist identity and life. For you, it’s

simply the matter of presiding over this year's convention and returning to the global ministry of your church. But for a lot of people—like the sexual abuse survivors I talk to almost every day—the stakes are infinitely higher.

The vast majority of Southern Baptists care about the abused and want accountability for abusers. They have made that clear, especially at the last annual meeting in Birmingham. The sorts of obstacles to such reform laid out here represent, I believe, a tiny minority of Southern Baptists, which is why, at least to the present moment, they have lost every vote on the floor of the Southern Baptist Convention. But sooner or later the majority of Southern Baptists will have to decide whether this sort of wickedness can continue to go on under their name. This tiny minority wants me to be afraid of them. They want you to be afraid of them. I am not afraid of them, and neither are you.

But there will be future SBC presidents and future entity presidents who will seek to lead in these areas. Will they too be subject to these sorts of tactics to silence them? And, more importantly, there will be Southern Baptists who will one day wonder whether they are just statistics, or if people even care about those who are raped and molested and then defamed as though they were adulterers. We cannot simply count on generational change. If there is not a radical culture change in this denomination, this will happen over and over and over again.

Again, I write this letter mainly because I feel conscience-driven to put down in writing what we have seen, if only so that I can be reminded of it myself if ever I find myself in a similar environment. I don't even know what I am asking you to do, if anything, other than to continue, as you have, to valiantly stand up for the victims of sexual abuse and to continue to work for churches that are safe for them. I pledge to do the same in the broader evangelical world. Ultimately, hearing "Me Too" is a necessary addendum to singing "Just As I Am," or else all our altar calls are in vain (Isa. 1:11-17).

I am grateful every day for your friendship and your leadership through such tumultuous times, especially since you, unexpectedly, ended up serving three years instead of two. You have led with excellence and integrity. I hope you and Veronica can get away for some well-deserved rest after this year's convention meeting.

For the Kingdom,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Russell D. Moore". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "R".

Russell D. Moore

President

Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission

Southern Baptist Convention

(June 1, 2013-June 1, 2021)

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