

Southern Baptists call Paige Patterson to account

Firing him as seminary president is the most dramatic example of the #MeToo movement pervading the top reaches of the Southern Baptist Convention.

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Paige Patterson gives a report during the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in June 2017 in Phoenix. Photo courtesy of Baptist Press/Adam Covington.

The Southern Baptist Convention's largest seminary fired president Paige Patterson following an outpouring of criticism—including from within the denomination—for his comments on women. Patterson is also a former president of the 15-million-member denomination.

After meeting for 13 hours on May 22, the board of trustees of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, voted to make Paige Patterson president emeritus.

A week later, the school's executive committee, responding to what it said was new information about Patterson's handling of a sexual abuse allegation, voted to remove his emeritus status and to withdraw a previous invitation for him to reside on campus as theologian-in-residence with compensation.

The committee's May 30 statement said the school "denounces all abusive behavior, any behavior that enables abuse, any failure to protect the abused and any failure to safeguard those who are vulnerable to abuse."

On May 22, the *Washington Post* [reported](#) that in 2003 Patterson discouraged a student at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary from going to police after she told him she had been raped. Patterson, who was seminary president at the time, encouraged her to forgive the assailant.

In April a [tape](#) from 2000 surfaced in which Patterson said he never counsels divorce for abused women and then recounted an incident in which he told an abused woman to be "submissive in every way that you can." More recent [sermons](#) also came to light, including one with a comment about the body of a teenage girl and another suggesting that female seminarians need to work harder at looking attractive.

Patterson issued [a public apology](#) on May 10, asking for forgiveness from women for "the failure to be as thoughtful and careful in my extemporaneous expression as I should have been."

A few days prior to his apology, more than 3,200 Southern Baptist women signed an online letter asking the trustees to take action against Patterson. Karen Swallow Prior, a professor of English at Liberty University, was among the signers.

"If you had told me a month ago that Paige Patterson would be removed from his office, I would never have believed it," she said.

The board appointed D. Jeffrey Bingham, dean of the School of Theology, to the position of interim president but did not address any of the offending comments or actions that led to Patterson's removal.

Patterson was one of three leaders who engineered the conservative takeover of the SBC in the early 1980s. Afterward he helped oust hundreds of moderates and liberals from their posts as administrators, department heads, and seminary posts. He also pushed through a resolution opposing the ordination of women. In 1998, the year Patterson was elected SBC president, the convention amended its statement of faith to say that “a wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband.”

After Patterson’s removal from Southwestern seminary’s top post, one of his colleagues predicted that the impact of the #MeToo movement on the denomination was just beginning.

Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, said, “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.”

FOLLOWING UP (Updated July 3): Paige Patterson did not preach at the convention’s annual meeting in Dallas in June as had been originally scheduled. It was the first time he would miss the annual meeting in 66 years, he said in a statement. He also said that events leading to his dismissal had not been accurately represented.

“The mood of the Southern Baptist Convention right now would be similar to that of the country after Watergate,” said Russell Moore, president of the convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, in an interview with Religion News Service before the annual meeting. The commission Moore leads announced that it will partner with a research firm to study the extent of sexual abuse that is occurring in churches. The commission also has received a request to evaluate the feasibility of establishing an “online verification database” of known sexual predators among ministers and other church personnel. It is scheduled to report on the issue at next year’s annual meeting.

The convention elected as president J. D. Greear, a 45-year-old pastor of the Summit, a North Carolina megachurch.

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