

SBC Clergy Predators ‘Wolves’ in the Church

When congregational autonomy becomes an excuse for failing to protect kids against sexual predators, then it is part of an immoral construct. That is the perversion I see in the country’s largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention.

A month ago, on Sept. 26, I stood with other leaders from the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) in front of SBC headquarters in Nashville. We delivered to SBC officials a letter requesting action to rid the denomination of clergy predators.

The [letter](#) was not, as has been suggested, a call to abandon Baptist structure. It was rather a call to heed the biblical admonition to “be on your guard” against wolves who rise up among church leaders. (See Acts 20:28-31)

Clergy predators are not just a few bad apples; they are the forewarned-of wolves who are savaging the flock. (See Matthew 7:15)

SNAP’s letter was a plea to SBC officials to be good shepherds. The response has been a deafening silence punctured by a few mutterings about congregational autonomy.

This is consistent with the responses tossed our way on prior attempts to communicate with SBC officials. Over and over, we have heard the increasingly immoral-sounding mantra of “congregational autonomy.”

During this past month, SBC President Frank Page and Executive Committee President Morris Chapman posed for [pictures](#) with President Bush. They sure don’t look like powerless men while standing there in the Oval Office. Yet, that is their excuse—that they are essentially powerless when it comes to protecting kids

against clergy predators in Southern Baptist churches. Why? Congregational autonomy.

Though SBC officials can't find time to address SNAP's request to make churches safer, Second Vice President Wiley Drake found time to call on Southern Baptist churches to develop an "[exit strategy](#)" from public schools. Ironically, Drake drew his language from a 2005 [SBC resolution](#) urging that Southern Baptists should "investigate diligently" their local schools and "commit to hold accountable schools, institutions and industries for their moral influence on our children."

How about a commitment to hold accountable the leaders of this institution—the Southern Baptist Convention—and how about a diligent investigation of them?

Eighteen Southern Baptist leaders were put on notice of a substantiated report about a minister's sexual abuse of a minor, and they all turned a blind eye while the man continued in ministry.

How could that happen? "Congregational autonomy:" a phrase that sounds more and more like a rationalization for abdication of moral responsibility.

If the same thing happened in a public school, leaders would have to answer for it.

Imagine if a school district superintendent responded to a report about a teacher who sexually abused a student by shrugging and saying, "Not my job—each school handles its own teachers."

What if the school principal then did nothing, and the reported teacher continued working with kids?

At any school district in the country, parents would be outraged; and the superintendent, principal and teacher would all three be out of a job. There are systems for accountability in public schools.

People should demand from Southern Baptist leaders the same sort of

accountability that they would demand from leaders in a public school system.

Or from political leaders.

When it was disclosed that a member of Congress sent lurid e-mails to a teen page, the matter was referred to an independent investigatory committee, not only to ascertain the truth about the e-mails, but to determine whether other leaders knew and kept quiet.

Shouldn't religious leaders be held to at least the same level of accountability as political leaders? Southern Baptists need an independent review board to consider reports of clergy sex abuse and to hold accountable those who do nothing when abuse is reported.

Men who sexually abuse girls have an [average](#) of 52 victims each. Men who sexually abuse boys have an average of 150 victims each. Only 3 percent of these crimes are ever detected.

If Southern Baptist leaders do nothing even when they receive a substantiated report, how many more lambs will be given over to the wolves?

People should be outraged by the "can't do/won't do/won't even try" style of leadership that SBC officials have shown when confronted with clergy sex abuse. Your kids deserve better protection. Your churches deserve better leadership.

I care as little about the precise parameters of congregational autonomy as I do about how many angels might fit on the head of a pin. It's pure nonsense for SBC leaders to use that as an excuse for failing to protect kids against clergy predators. It's also immoral.

Protecting the young is a sacred obligation. There are no excuses.

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