

Baptist Identity: How It Masks Clergy Sex Abuse in the Southern Baptist Convention

by Christa Brown

“The world may never understand our polity.”¹ With those seven words, the Southern Baptist Convention’s top official invoked Baptist identity, cast Baptists against the secularism of “the world,” and used religious doctrine to defend the denomination’s do-nothing response to the problem of predatory clergy who sexually violate the young and vulnerable. His statements were met with rousing applause from the rally of over seven thousand Baptist believers.²

Background

At the end of 2008, *TIME* magazine named the Southern Baptist Convention’s rejection of a clergy sex-abuser database as one of the “top 10 underreported news stories” of the year.³ It was on the same “top 10” list with stories about the deadly conflict in Sri Lanka and the civil war in the Congo. So, the story of Baptist do-nothingness on clergy sex abuse was a story that kept dreadful company.

With a claimed membership of over sixteen million, the Southern Baptist Convention has a population the size of Chile and is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States.⁴ It has over 101,000 clergy;⁵ yet it has no effective system of oversight for them. Though other major faith groups now have denominational processes for assessing complaints against clergy, for disciplining clergy, and for possibly defrocking clergy, the Southern Baptist Convention does not.⁶ It does not keep denominational records on clergy who have been credibly accused of sexual abuse; nor does it have any denominational system for warning people about accused clergy who church-hop. These gaps mean that children in Southern Baptist churches are not

being afforded the same sorts of institutional safeguards as children in Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran and Episcopal churches.⁷

As explanation for why Southern Baptists cannot implement safeguards similar to those in other major faith groups, denominational officials consistently put forward the Baptist doctrine of “local church autonomy.”⁸ Based on this doctrine, denominational officials assert that they are powerless to intervene and that clergy sex abuse survivors must take their information to the local church of the accused minister. Metaphorically, this is like telling bloody sheep that they should go to the den of the wolf who savaged them.

It is a system that does not work. It inflicts additional wounds on people who have *already* been greatly wounded within the faith community. It allows predatory clergy to remain in positions of high trust without any realistic system of accountability. And it stands in marked contrast to what other major faith groups are now doing through the provision of regional bodies that can receive complaints and can potentially review a pastor’s continued fitness for ministry.⁹

Local church autonomy and Baptist identity

Local church autonomy is a defining doctrine of Baptist belief and a core aspect of Baptist identity. In his book titled *The Baptist Identity*, Walter B. Shurden, a former professor and founding director of the Center for Baptist Studies at Mercer University, named local church autonomy as one of only four essential components of Baptist identity.¹⁰ By this doctrine,¹¹ Baptists profess that local churches are autonomous and self-governing bodies, which are not subject to the dictates of any denominational entity.

Baptists believe that the autonomy of the local church is founded on a biblical narrative that depicts New Testament churches as separate entities.¹² Because of this asserted biblical basis, Baptists consider theology to be an essential element of their polity.¹³ However, this

theological undergirding has been misused by Southern Baptist officials so as to make “local church autonomy” into a rallying cry for rendering outside criticism into an attack on the faith and for solidifying the faith group’s unity for preservation of the status quo.¹⁴

Malleability of the local church autonomy doctrine

The Baptist doctrine of local church autonomy has shown itself to be a highly malleable doctrine. As Baptist historian Nancy Ammerman has observed, on the one hand, Baptists assert that the local church is the only legitimate source of authority, but on the other hand, they allow “a de facto oligarchy to prevail.”¹⁵ This on-the-ground reality meshes with Larry Kent Graham’s description of “unaccountable and intractable power arrangements.”¹⁶ Such arrangements exist, he wrote, “when a person or group disowns responsibility as either an agent or receptor of power, while simultaneously refusing to relinquish their current power position.”¹⁷ This is the sort of malleability that is afforded by Baptists’ doctrine of local church autonomy as it allows Southern Baptist officials to disown responsibility with respect to some issues while simultaneously retaining power with respect to others. Graham explained:

In such cases, power usually operates covertly rather than openly . . . The patterns are set, and often are sanctioned by those in the more dominant position by an appeal to “the natural order,” “God’s will,” “national security,” or the like.¹⁸

With Southern Baptists, what we see is that the pattern of denominational do-nothingness on reports of clergy sex abuse is a pattern sanctioned by those in power through appeal to Baptist identity in the form of “local church autonomy.”¹⁹

In actual day-to-day practice, however, there are many ways in which the local churches are *not* autonomous. “What Southern Baptists read every Sunday, the person they hear in the pulpit, the very programs that give shape to their church life, are the products of the denomination, not of any local church,” said Ammerman.²⁰ Southern Baptists share a common

faith identity “created by the common programs and practices of most Southern Baptist churches, the majority of which use curricular materials produced by the denomination’s central publishing agencies.”²¹

Southern Baptists profess a foundational belief in local church autonomy, but they built a denomination “with a unified budget and central decision making.”²² As Bill Leonard, professor of church history and Baptist studies at Wake Forest University Divinity School explained:

Southern Baptists continue to maintain one of the most elaborate denominational systems in the United States. The Southern Baptist denominational program provides members with an astounding sense of identity.²³

Thus, even though Southern Baptists disclaim a formal structure of hierarchy, they have nevertheless been among the most “hierarchically functioning” denominations in America,” according to Ammerman.²⁴ They affirm local church autonomy as a key doctrine in theory while, at the same time, they reduce the functioning of local church autonomy through their denominational entities and practices.²⁵ As Norman Yance explained: In theory, “the local congregation is the repository of authority,” but in practice, “Southern Baptists are centralized.”²⁶

Sociologists Randolph Cantrell, James Krile and George Donohue developed a scale for measuring the degree of local church autonomy that exists within a denomination’s churches,²⁷ and Nancy Ammerman applied that scale to Southern Baptists. She reported these conclusions:

Of the fourteen questions on their scale, Southern Baptists *clearly* submit to nonlocal control on only one.... On five items, power is in local hands.... But on eight items decisions sometimes (or always) are made in consultation with nonlocal entities. . . . And churches always depend on local and state denominational officials for pastor search help. Beyond the everyday ways in which the denomination shapes local church life, even in these legal and personnel decisions, *Southern Baptist congregations are not always autonomous entities.*²⁸

Thus, while Southern Baptists stake a significant part of their religious identity on the doctrine of local church autonomy, in actual practice, the local churches “are not always autonomous entities.”²⁹ In practice, the doctrine is so malleable that it allows Southern Baptist leaders to take on the role of Humpty Dumpty saying “it means just what I choose it to mean.”³⁰

The doctrine’s malleability has frequently been exposed by the actions of Southern Baptist leaders themselves as they seek to exert control on issues they deem critical. In the last twenty years, the Southern Baptist Convention has tended to impact local congregations by setting policies “regarding what you have to believe . . . what you have to believe about the Bible, what you have to believe about women in ministry, what you have to believe about sexuality,” explained Leonard, and this reality makes the Southern Baptist Convention’s position on church autonomy a “shaky” one.³¹

For example, in 2009, when the Southern Baptist Convention’s Executive Committee in Nashville “received information” that there were five openly gay church members in a fourteen hundred member Texas church (and that two of the five were assigned to a church committee), the Executive Committee took on the task of sending out an “investigative questionnaire” to assess whether the church was acting “to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior.”³² Though the church responded that it extended “Christian hospitality to everyone” but did not “endorse, approve or affirm homosexual behavior,” this was not enough for denominational officials, who continued with their investigation and ultimately ousted³³ the church from denominational affiliation based on the church’s “perceived toleration of gay members.”³⁴

In this scenario, the Southern Baptist Convention’s Executive Committee effectively functioned as a denominational review board to assess a church’s conformity (or “perceived” conformity) with the Convention’s position on homosexuality. Yet, in 2008, the Southern Baptist

Convention's Executive Committee rejected the possibility of a denominational review board to assess whether churches may be retaining ministers who have been credibly accused of sexual abuse. The Associated Press summarized the Executive Committee's statement on the matter:

Local church autonomy rules out creating a centralized investigative body to determine who has been credibly accused of sexual abuse or anything else . . . and the convention has no authority to bar known perpetrators from ministry or start an office to field abuse claims.³⁵

Thus, while Southern Baptist officials had no apparent doctrinal problem with investigating a local church for its "perceived toleration of gay members," Southern Baptist officials set forth the doctrine of "local church autonomy" as a barrier to any sort of denominational review for reports of clergy sex abuse.

This malleability in the local church autonomy doctrine means that its application can be easily manipulated. The doctrine can be used in ways that take it outside its asserted theological foundation and that instead make the authority of religion into a mask for other functions, such as preservation of the status quo, preservation of existing power dynamics, preservation of traditional norms, preservation of image, minimization of perceived potential legal liability risks, or marginalization of divergent stories for the sake of the official story.

Mask of God

People who, as kids, were sexually abused by Southern Baptist clergy are people who hold divergent stories. The official story – the story consistent with Baptist identity – is that Southern Baptists are "people of the Book" and that their clergy are called by God.³⁶ Yet, the reality is that, among those clergy are men who use religious language and symbols to commit serial acts of sexual violence against children and underage adolescents.³⁷

In effect, predatory clergy put on the mask of God in order to commit their crimes. Baptist identity helps to secure those masks and keep them in place. A shared denominational identity keeps the mantle of trust on ministers' shoulders, but among Southern Baptists, denominational identity is simultaneously disclaimed for purposes of clergy accountability or discipline. Then everything is up to the local church, and it is as though the denomination disappears.

A single church – even a quite small church – can ordain a Southern Baptist minister. But once ordained, a minister can easily migrate to other churches, and will most likely do so with job search assistance from denominational offices. Thus, a single church ordains a minister, but he is ordained for much more than a single church. As a practical matter, this means that the church with the lowest standard can effectively *set* the standard for the denomination. Thereby, the laxity of a single church can unleash a preacher-predator into the larger denominational body; yet, the denomination exercises no oversight.

For Southern Baptist ministers, there is no significant entrance hurdle into the profession. The suitability of a person for ministry is not tested through any screening process, and no seminary education is required. If a person can convince a small congregation – perhaps as few as a dozen people – that he has been “called” by God, he can probably get himself ordained and into the system.³⁸ This allows personal charisma and persuasive ability to carry extraordinary power.³⁹ Thus, while Southern Baptists' shared faith identity facilitates the mobility of ministers within the denomination, it does *not* facilitate the accountability of ministers to those who share the faith identity. Instead, the doctrine of “local church autonomy” is used in a way that minimizes the possibility of clergy accountability and that indirectly serves as a shield for clergy child molesters.⁴⁰

Most of the time, the young victims of a predatory pastor see the mask, not the man. That way of seeing derives from their *own* Baptist identity. From their earliest Sunday School classes, they have been raised to believe that they should “obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves, for they watch over your souls.”⁴¹ So, the ordinary Baptist-raised kid is not likely to question an anointed man of God.⁴² For such a kid, raised in a tradition that says the Bible is the inerrant word of God, Bible verses can become powerful weapons.⁴³ In effect, such a kid is like a fish in a barrel for a clergy predator. The kid is trapped by the boundaries of his or her own faith identity and, because of it, easy prey.

Masks of complicity

Though the sexual abuse itself may be the most obvious form of violence perpetrated on church kids in the name of religion, many Southern Baptist clergy abuse survivors say that other forms of religiously-fueled oppression also caused them great harm in the aftermath of the abuse. In this respect, the problem is as much one of omission as of commission.⁴⁴ The realm of psychological and spiritual devastation caused by the sexual violence is enlarged by the complicit silencing tactics, hostility and indifference⁴⁵ that abuse survivors often encounter when they seek to report a minister’s abuse within the faith community.⁴⁶

Clergy sex abuse inflicts severe, long-lasting psychological and spiritual wounds on large numbers of church kids. The wounding is accomplished, and accountability avoided, through religiously based tactics. “Masks of complicity” are worn by religious leaders, and “masks of otherness” are placed onto the victims.⁴⁷

It is the very nature of the harm that it often takes many years, and even decades, for child sex abuse survivors to speak about what was done to them.⁴⁸ This is common, and because most child sex crimes go unreported for many years, offenders often escape criminal

responsibility for their actions.⁴⁹ Nowadays, in many other major faith groups, an adult who is bringing forward an allegation of having been sexually abused by a minister in childhood will have at least the possibility of presenting that report to a denominational or ecclesiastical review board that is outside the minister's immediate circle of trust.⁵⁰ This is not so, however, for those who report being sexually abused by Southern Baptist clergy.⁵¹ They are told that they must take their abuse report to the minister's own church.⁵² Because the congregants will typically circle the wagons around a trusted minister,⁵³ and because denominational officials will refuse to even look into the matter, victims of Southern Baptist clergy violence are often revictimized if they attempt to seek any sort of accountability within the faith community. Typically, they come away from the experience devastated by the realization that denominational officials are content to leave accused perpetrators in their pulpits without any process of review,⁵⁴ and by a sense that the broader faith community has been complicit in the violence, by virtue of the silence of the many and the do-nothingness of the denomination.⁵⁵

In effect, Southern Baptist officials use the doctrine of "local church autonomy" as a sound-barrier to assure that the voices of those abused by clergy will not be heard. Thus, a defining doctrine of Baptist identity gets used as a tool for relegating clergy sex abuse survivors to a ghetto of silence and invisibility. Again, Larry Kent Graham provides a description that parallels what we see in the Southern Baptist arrangement of power: "The most pernicious dimension of victimizing and chaotic power arrangements is their imperviousness to change. Countervailing elements are denigrated, suppressed, or ignored."⁵⁶

In 2007 and 2008, as clergy abuse survivors gathered some media attention and sought action from Southern Baptist leadership,⁵⁷ the responses grew ugly. At first, Southern Baptist officials put on a public face of pretending that clergy sex abuse was not a significant problem

for them, claiming there had only been “several reported cases” within the Southern Baptist Convention.⁵⁸ Yet, even if one counted only a few years’ worth of the *publicly* reported cases, there were many scores more than “several.”⁵⁹ The Associated Press gathered twenty years’ worth of insurance company data, which showed that Protestant churches reported more clergy abuse claims to their insurance carriers than the number of “credible accusations” that were reported against Catholic clergy.⁶⁰ And Baptists are by far the largest of the Protestant groups.

This data was consistent with what Philip Jenkins, religious studies professor at Pennsylvania State University had been saying for a decade. He explained that the “relative ease of litigation against Catholic dioceses,” as compared to litigation against some other faith groups,⁶¹ had been a significant factor in creating a public misperception that clergy sex abuse is primarily a Catholic problem, when in fact there is no data to support such a conclusion.⁶² “Some of the worst cases of persistent serial abuse by clergy have involved Baptist or Pentecostal ministers, rather than Catholic priests,” states Jenkins.⁶³

Masks of otherness

Ultimately, when Southern Baptist officials could no longer retain credibility by outright dismissing the problem, they began to attack the messengers who were bringing the problem to light. This “attack the messenger” tactic was seen at even the highest levels. For example, Southern Baptist president Frank Page publicly castigated clergy abuse survivors who speak out as being “nothing more than opportunistic persons who are seeking to raise opportunities for personal gain.”⁶⁴ He wrote this in a column in the *Florida Baptist Witness*,⁶⁵ which is a denominational publication. Thus, Page used easy access to Baptist media as a means to disseminate a harsh message about clergy abuse survivors. He cast abuse survivors into a single identity as “opportunists” and then essentialized them as “nothing more.”

Then, a former Southern Baptist president and current seminary president, Paige Patterson, denounced the clergy abuse survivors' support group as "evil-doers," and said they were "just as reprehensible as sex criminals."⁶⁶ Thereby, he cast the conflict in archetypal terms of good vs. evil, and those who were speaking out about clergy molestations were cast with the forces of evil.

When the highest leaders of a powerful religious organization use such inflammatory rhetoric, it fosters a hostile climate and can have an insidious trickle-down effect. With rhetoric such as this, Southern Baptist leaders effectively transformed clergy sex abuse survivors into "others" – "others" who were attacking the faith – "others" who were debasing the doctrine of local church autonomy – "others" who were trying to force Baptists into the ways of "the world." In this manner, the wronged were transmogrified into wrongdoers.

Southern Baptist choice of inaction

Evoked as a fundamental of Baptist identity, the doctrine of "local church autonomy" is misused by Southern Baptist leaders as a rationalization for not getting involved, or indeed for not caring. The doctrine is used to exclude the Southern Baptist Convention from what has become a baseline standard of care in other major faith groups – i.e., a review process that allows complaints about clergy to be assessed by persons who are outside the minister's congregational circle of influence and trust. Without such a process, the faith group cannot responsibly hear the voices of those wounded by clergy, and predatory clergy cannot effectively be held accountable so as to prevent future harm to others. By failing to act, Southern Baptist officials allow for predation that could have otherwise been stopped, and they allow it under the rubric of religious doctrine.

“Not acting is still acting,” said Paul Ricoeur.⁶⁷ Arne Johan Vetlesen carried this thought further by explaining that the failure to act can be “a failure which carries a message to both the agent and the sufferer: the action may proceed.”⁶⁸ This is the message that predatory-minded Southern Baptist clergy most likely receive: “Proceed.”

Vetlesen asserts: “The perpetrator will fear the bystander to the extent he has reason to believe that the bystander will intervene.”⁶⁹ Southern Baptist ministers who are inclined toward sexual predation have little reason to fear that they will be held accountable because there is little reason to believe that anyone within the faith community will intervene. Denominational officials have made it clear that they will not hear the cries of those wounded by Southern Baptist clergy; nor will they intervene to prevent predatory clergy from church-hopping their way to new prey in unsuspecting congregations. This choice of inaction is at the core of Southern Baptist complicity in the sexual abuse of children by clergy and in the revictimization of those who attempt to report such abuse. It is an inaction that is justified and rationalized through the religious construct of “local church autonomy.”

“Once one is aware of the things that one could do, and one then does not do them, then lack of action is something one has chosen.”⁷⁰ Southern Baptist officials have chosen to stake out “local church autonomy” as the doctrinal reason for why they cannot implement denominational safeguards against clergy predators. Furthermore, they have chosen the precise boundaries of what that “autonomy” aspect of their identity means. Their chosen boundaries allow denominational officials to profess powerlessness in the face of clergy sex abuse, while at the same time, exercising power on a myriad of other issues.⁷¹ By privileging the most radical form of congregationalist polity in the clergy sex abuse context, while allowing a flexible form in

other contexts, Southern Baptists send a message that, in this faith group, clergy violence may “proceed” with impunity.

Conclusion

Choices clearly exist. Yet despite the harm that is being done to so many, Southern Baptist leaders choose to promote their self-constructed version of “local church autonomy” as the singular component of Baptist identity for purposes of refusing what are now common-place institutional mechanisms for the prevention of clergy sex abuse. In so choosing, they allow religious doctrine to facilitate and mask clergy violence.

Notes

¹ Bob Allen, “SBC leaders recommend against national database of clergy sex offenders,” *EthicsDaily*, June 11, 2008 (quoting Morris Chapman, Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee president).

² Elizabeth Ulrich, “Save Yourselves.” *Nashville Scene*, June 19, 2008.

³ Laura Fitzgerald, “Top 10 underreported news stories of 2008: Southern Baptists decide against pedophilia database,” *TIME*, November 3, 2008; *see also* Bob Allen, “*TIME* ranks SBC rejection of sex-offender database as ‘underreported’ story,” *Associated Baptist Press*, December 17, 2008.

⁴ Because churches are not required to remove inactive members from their numbers, many question the Southern Baptist Convention’s claim of 16 million. For example, Christine Wicker contends that the number who attend Southern Baptist Sunday Schools – about 4 million – is a more accurate picture of the number of “true, devoted, church-loving” Southern Baptists in the country. Christine Wicker, *The Fall of the Evangelical Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 24. Nevertheless, whether 16 million or 4 million or something in between, Southern Baptists are widely acknowledged as “the most politically powerful evangelical group in the country,” and some say that they “are scaring the bejesus out of the rest of America.” Wicker, *The Fall of the Evangelical Nation*, 24.

⁵ Richard N. Ostling (Associated Press), “Protestants face abuse scandals,” *Times Union*, April 7, 2002.

⁶ *See* Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 49, 59 (noting Protestant denominations that have established policies and

procedures for responding to sexual abuse allegations involving clergy); *see also* Douglas R. Sharp, “Child sexual abuse in churches cannot be ignored,” *EthicsDaily*, May 31, 2010)(with links to published policies and procedures in some mainline Protestant faith groups).

⁷ Clergy sex abuse can happen in any faith group, and there have been horrific failures and cover-ups in all faith groups. However, as compared to the other major faith groups in the United States, Southern Baptists are lacking in institutional mechanisms for attempting to systematically address the problem.

⁸ When Southern Baptist delegates (or “messengers”) instructed Southern Baptist officials to conduct a study on the creation of a denominational database of credibly-accused clergy offenders, the Associated Press summed up the leadership’s response as follows:

Local church autonomy rules out creating a centralized investigative body to determine who has been credibly accused of sexual abuse or anything else ... and the convention has no authority to bar known perpetrators from ministry or start an office to field abuse claims.

Associated Press, “Southern Baptists elect a president, reject sex-abuse database,” *USA Today* (June 10, 2008).

⁹ For example, the congregationalist churches of the United Church of Christ enter into a covenantal relationship by which ministers are subject to the “oversight” of regional bodies. “When a minister’s fitness for ministry is called into question,” a “fitness review” may be conducted. If it is determined that a minister “has engaged in behavior unbefitting an authorized minister or is no longer fit for ministry,” a record of that determination is kept, and may be communicated to other churches. In addition, a minister may be suspended or terminated from ministry. Parish Life, “The oversight of ministries authorized by the United Church of Christ,” in *Manual on Ministry* (United Church Resources, 2002), 14-15.

¹⁰ Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 1993), 33-34.

¹¹ Southern Baptists’ “official confession of faith,” the *Baptist Faith and Message*, delineates their “doctrines” regarding polity, the church, scripture, salvation, baptism and other issues. Bill J. Leonard, *Baptists in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 102, 130.

¹² James L. Sullivan. *Baptist Polity – As I See It* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 10.

¹³ Sullivan, *Baptist Polity – As I See It*, 34-35, 38-40.

¹⁴ As longtime religion writer Mark I. Pinsky has explained, within some ministries, “criticism from outsiders often is seen as a badge of honor that validates the ministry’s

righteousness.” In other words, rather than prodding change, criticism from outsiders may have the opposite effect of solidifying the group’s unity against what are perceived as the non-righteous forces of “the world.” Mark I. Pinsky, “Teflon televangelists,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 34:1 (Winter 2008).

¹⁵ Nancy Ammerman, *Baptist Battles* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 177.

¹⁶ Larry Kent Graham, *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds* (Nashville: Abingdon 1992), 141.

¹⁷ Graham, *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds*, 141.

¹⁸ Graham, *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds*, 141.

¹⁹ Despite the manner in which Southern Baptists, and some other Baptist groups, use the local church autonomy doctrine to disclaim denominational responsibility, the doctrine is not inherently inconsistent with denominational clergy accountability systems. For example, although the American Baptist Churches USA also hold to local church autonomy as an essential aspect of Baptist identity, they nevertheless have regional ecclesial processes of accountability which are administered by a covenant relationship through which American Baptist ministers agree to hold one another accountable. See *Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches*, October 2004.

²⁰ Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 259.

²¹ Susan M. Shaw, *God Speaks to Us, Too: Southern Baptist Women on Church, Home and Society* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 26. Shaw, director of the Women’s Studies Program at Oregon State University, describes herself as “a Baptist minister in exile in the United Church of Christ.” She explains: “I was Baptist ‘teeth and toe’ . . . I couldn’t change my identity.” Shaw, *God Speaks to Us*, 12.

²² Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 265. The Southern Baptist Convention’s central funding mechanism of the Cooperative Program was initiated in 1925 as a “denominationally based corporate funding program.” Leonard, *Baptists in America*, 101. See also E. Glenn Hinson, “Oh, Baptists, how your corporation has grown!” in *Distinctively Baptist: Essays on Baptist History*, ed. Marc A. Jolley and John D. Pierce (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005)(explaining how, in the 20th century, the Southern Baptist Convention has moved toward a corporate model in the structuring, development and marketing of its organization).

²³ Bill J. Leonard, *The Challenge of Being Baptist: Owning a Scandalous Past and an Uncertain Future* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press 2010), 29.

²⁴ Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 270. Similarly, Paul Harrison gave this explanation of how Baptists’ congregationalist polity actually gives rise to hierarchical structures:

Of all the highly rationalized, voluntary associations in America probably the Baptists have been most radical in their insistence that the social system can operate effectively without recourse to well-defined lines of authority. But no group can function without leadership, and it has been argued that when leaders are divested of authority they will necessarily seek and gain power in order to meet their responsibilities; the power they acquire may exceed that which ordinarily accrues to leaders in non-totalitarian hierarchical institutions.

Paul Harrison, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition* (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 1959), 207.

²⁵ Harrison, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition*, 9.

²⁶ Norman A. Yance. *Religion Southern Style: Southern Baptists and Society in Historical Perspective* (Danville, VA: Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, 1978), 22.

²⁷ Randolph L. Cantrell, James F. Krile and George A. Donohue, "Parish autonomy: Measuring denominational differences," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22:3 (1983) 276-287.

²⁸ Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 260.

²⁹ Examples of other ways in which Southern Baptist denominational entities side-step the autonomy doctrine so as to assist local churches in cooperative endeavors include the following: mission projects, denominational newspapers, media staff and public relations personnel, educational programs for clergy, retirement plans for clergy, and clergy job placement services. See Robert Parham, "Dismantle false wall of church autonomy that protects child predator preachers," *EthicsDaily*, April 9, 2007.

³⁰ In *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice and Humpty Dumpty have this exchange:

"When I use a word'," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master - - that's all."

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (Raleigh, NC: Hayes Barton Press, 1872), 72.

³¹ Elizabeth Ulrich, "What would Jesus say?" *Nashville Scene* (February 14, 2008)(quoting Bill Leonard of Wake Forest University Divinity School).

³² Bob Allen, "SBC Executive Committee postpones vote on ouster of Broadway Baptist," *Associated Baptist Press*, June 17, 2009; Bob Allen and Marv Knox, "SBC messengers sever ties with Texas church over gay members," *Associated Baptist Press*, June 23, 2009; Brian Kaylor, "SBC delays action to remove Broadway Baptist Church from membership," *EthicsDaily*, February 17, 2009.

³³ Without dissent, the Southern Baptist Convention's 83-member Executive Committee recommended the ouster of Broadway Baptist Church from affiliation and the severance of the church's 125-year history in the SBC. At the next annual meeting, thousands of delegates (called "messengers") voted to adopt the Executive Committee's recommendation and to oust Broadway based on its "perceived toleration of gay members." Allen and Knox, "SBC messengers sever ties with Texas church over gay members."

³⁴ Kaylor, "SBC delays action to remove Broadway Baptist;" Allen and Knox, "SBC messengers sever ties with Texas church over gay members." Also, in 2010, the Baptist General Convention of Texas asked Royal Lane Baptist Church to remove itself from affiliation after learning that the church had added to its website a statement describing itself as a "vibrant mosaic of varied racial identities, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and denominational backgrounds." Ken Camp, "Dallas church announces gay-friendly stance, endangering BGCT affiliation," *Associated Baptist Press*, March 9, 2010; ABP Staff, "BGCT takes action against church suspected of affirming gays," *Associated Baptist Press*, March 17, 2010. Other Baptist state conventions have had similar controversies. Most notably, in 2006, the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina adopted a strong "anti-gay" policy, allowing denominational authorities "to investigate credible reports that individual churches act to affirm or endorse homosexuals." Bob Allen, "North Carolina Baptists vote to exclude gays," *EthicsDaily*, November 16, 2006. And in the mid-1990s, the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina required that all messengers to its annual meeting sign "a statement assuring that the congregation from which they came gave no support to homosexuality in any form whatsoever." Leonard, *Baptists in America*, 240. In a similar manner, local churches that placed women in the position of senior pastor have also been ousted from denominational affiliations. Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 94; Bob Allen, "Georgia Baptists cut ties with church led by woman pastor," *Associated Baptist Press*, November 16, 2009; Bob Allen, "Georgia Baptists oust second church with woman pastor," *Associated Baptist Press*, November 16, 2010.

³⁵ Associated Press, "Southern Baptists elect a president, reject sex-abuse database," *USA Today* (June 10, 2008); see also Bob Allen, "SBC leaders recommend against national database of clergy sex offenders," *EthicsDaily*, June 11, 2008. For the entirety of the statement made by the president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee, see <http://www.morrischapman.com/article.asp?id=73> . In part, it states:

Southern Baptists believe that the local church in New Testament times was autonomous and thus our local churches are autonomous. The world may never understand our polity. The Convention has no hierarchy and no ecclesiastical authority over our local churches.

³⁶ Sullivan, *Baptist Polity – As I See It*, 38-40; Leonard, *Baptists in America*, 129.

³⁷ Several examples of sexual abuse by Southern Baptist ministers are recounted by Elizabeth Ulrich in “What would Jesus say?” *Nashville Scene*, Feb. 14, 2008, and in “Save Yourselves,” *Nashville Scene*, June 19, 2008. See also Christa Brown, *This Little Light: Beyond a Baptist Preacher Predator and His Gang* (Cedarburg, WI: Foremost Press, 2009)(recounting and documenting other stories of Southern Baptist clergy sex abuse and denominational inaction).

³⁸ Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 108.

³⁹ In discussing the lack of any entrance hurdle or seminary requirement for most Baptist ministers, and the power such a system can give to pure charisma, Charles Kimball, a professor of comparative religion and a Baptist minister himself stated: “It is not surprising, therefore, that many Christian cult groups spring from Baptist and Pentecostal churches.” Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, 109.

⁴⁰ “Baptists’ disconnected system for securing ministers indirectly shields perpetrators.” Marv Knox, “Churches must act to prevent clergy sexual abuse,” *Baptist Standard*, 2002 (paraphrasing Texas Baptist official Sonny Spurger).

⁴¹ Hebrews 13:17 (KJV).

⁴² As one Southern Baptist abuse survivor who was victimized as an adolescent boy explained: “These are men anointed by the very right hand of God. Men whose every action, every word is approved and ordained by the big man himself. Questioning these men out loud is complete and utter blasphemy. Thinking it in your head is reason enough to pray for forgiveness.” <http://stopbaptistpredators.blogspot.com/2011/02/voice-of-fbc-benton-survivor.html> More of this particular survivor’s experience is recounted on his blog, *Descent from Darkness*: <http://dfromd.blogspot.com/> The Arkansas music minister who abused him was ultimately charged with fifty-four counts of sexual indecency with multiple boys. While he awaited sentencing, the prosecutor’s office was flooded with letters urging leniency for the minister, including “some from Benton’s most powerful citizens” and including a letter from Greg Kirksey, former president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention. Bob Allen, “Parole decision delayed for former music minister convicted of abuse,” *Associated Baptist Press*, December 2, 2011; David Koon, “The fall of man,” *Arkansas Times*, October 1, 2009; Ginny LaRoe, “Choir leader admits child sex abuse,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, August 28, 2009.

⁴³ See Margaret Kennedy, “Christianity and child sexual abuse – the survivors’ voice leading to change,” *Child Abuse Review* 9 (2000), 127-30 (explaining how clergy sex abuse almost invariably involves the cunning manipulation of religious authority, Bible verses, and God’s will).

⁴⁴ See Candace R. Benyei, *Understanding Clergy Misconduct in Religious Systems* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 1998), 82 (“In large part, the real risk born by the victim has to do with the failure, to date, of many denominations – particularly decentralized denominations, as well as denominationally unaffiliated families of faith – to have established, published, ministerial codes of ethics, investigatory protocols, and adequately trained response teams, as well as victim advocates. Instead, the ‘old boy’ system that has been so long in effect seems to function by the code of ‘whatever you can get away with is all right.’”)

⁴⁵ One Southern Baptist abuse survivor, whose story was widely reported, engaged a lengthy letter-writing campaign to numerous Southern Baptist officials only to be repeatedly “patronized and dismissed.” She received “a myriad of uncaring responses.” Ulrich, “What would Jesus say?”

⁴⁶ See Benyei, *Understanding Clergy Misconduct in Religious Systems*, 79.

⁴⁷ Cf. Michael A. Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 71, 115.

⁴⁸ Marci A. Hamilton, *Justice Denied: What America Must Do to Protect Its Children* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2-3, 18-19; see also Mark Sauer, “Waiting decades to break the silence,” *San Diego Union Tribune*, June 3, 2007; Donna Fielder, “Victims may keep abuse secret for years,” *Denton Record-Chronicle*, December 17, 2006.

⁴⁹ “National District Attorneys Association endorses statute of limitations reform,” August 2, 2007.

⁵⁰ Cf. Benyei, *Understanding Clergy Misconduct in Religious Systems*, 83 (“A majority of denominations have some form of internal review and disciplinary process....”)

⁵¹ Joe Trull, former professor of Christian ethics at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, explained the lack of accountability in this way:

In other denominations, [pastors] know that if charges are brought, truth will win out Most Baptists and nondenominational ministers know that “If I get caught, I can move to California and start a new church.”

Hannah Elliott, “Baptist churches more vulnerable to clergy sex abuse,” *Associated Baptist Press*, January 27, 2007.

⁵² See, e.g., Brown, *This Little Light*, 140.

⁵³ One journalist analyzed 130 news accounts in which Southern Baptist clergy were arrested, convicted or sued for sexual abuse, and found only six cases in which authorities were made aware of the abuse by another church leader. Bob Allen, “News Analysis: Churches not typically first reporters of sexual abuse,” *Associated Baptist Press*, November 22, 2011.

⁵⁴ After previously reporting on a Southern Baptist minister who “admitted to having sex with a teenager,” journalist Elizabeth Ulrich subsequently wrote that the same minister was “prepping next week’s sermon” as he continued in ministry with no action by the Southern Baptist Convention. Ulrich, “Save Yourselves,” *Nashville Scene*, June 19, 2008.

⁵⁵ As one Southern Baptist abuse survivor poignantly stated: “I just want someone to care.” Ulrich, “What would Jesus say?” Later, when Southern Baptist officials complained that this survivor’s story had been reported in a way that unfairly portrayed SBC officials as “uncaring,” the reporter publicly responded that “every abuse victim this reporter interviewed said as much all on their own.” Elizabeth Ulrich, “Baptism by fire,” *Nashville Scene*, Feb. 21, 2008.

⁵⁶ Graham, *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds*, 140-41.

⁵⁷ E.g., Associated Press, “Southern Baptists urged to root out molesters,” *MSNBC*, February 22, 2007.

⁵⁸ Bob Allen, “SBC president labels sexual abuse critics ‘opportunists’,” *EthicsDaily*, April 20, 2007.

⁵⁹ A five-year archive of media reports on Baptist clergy sex abuse was compiled by volunteer effort at www.StopBaptistPredators.org/news. However, these are only publicly reported cases. In effect, by refusing to institute any denominational system for documenting internal complaints, such as other major faith groups have, Southern Baptist officials assure that there will be fewer documented cases for their denomination. See Philip Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 144-45.

⁶⁰ Rose French (Associated Press), “Protestant church insurers handle 260 abuse cases a year,” *Insurance Journal*, February 18, 2007.

⁶¹ Generally, lawsuits against Baptist denominational groups face more hurdles than lawsuits against more obviously hierarchical faith groups, and this in turn means that it is often more difficult to get media exposure for Baptist clergy abuse cases. Southern Baptist officials boast that the Southern Baptist Convention has *never* been successfully sued, and they assert that Baptist “polity is the major reason.” Victims’ advocates assert that Southern Baptists’ misuse of their polity “allows predator pastors to operate with impunity.” Ulrich, “The Bad Shepherd.”

⁶² Philip Jenkins, *Pedophiles and Priests* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 51.

⁶³ Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism*, 142.

⁶⁴ Allen, “SBC president labels sexual abuse critics ‘opportunists’.”

⁶⁵ Frank Page, "Point of view: Guarding against sexual abuse in the church," *Florida Baptist Witness*, April 18, 2007.

⁶⁶ Allen, "SBC seminary president labels clergy sex-abuse victims' group 'evil-doers';" Ulrich, "What would Jesus say?"

⁶⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 157.

⁶⁸ Arne Johan Vetlesen, "Genocide: A case for responsibility of the bystander," *Journal of Peace Research*, 37-4 (July 2000), 522.

⁶⁹ Vetlesen, "Genocide," 521.

⁷⁰ Larry May, *Sharing Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 119.

⁷¹ In practice, the Southern Baptist construction of "local church autonomy" presumes the New Testament prescribes the doctrine so precisely as to allow churches to cooperate for the funding of ministers' retirements, for international missions, for keeping Baptist historical records, and even for investigating churches with gays in their membership, but *not* for responsibly assessing reports alleging clergy sex abuse. Given the obvious human hand in these definitional parameters, one can only wonder why Southern Baptist officials reject a definition that would allow for the better protection of church kids and for ministry to the wounded. Alternatively, Southern Baptist officials could choose to emphasize other aspects of their faith identity, such as Jesus' call to care for the "least of these," or to emphasize other aspects of their human identities, such as their role as parents and as community-minded adults who care for the young.

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