

GUEST OPINION: Rising above the sexual abuse scandal

Editor's Note: Following is an open letter to members of First Church, Vicksburg, by their senior pastor, Matt Buckles.



Buckles

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– One case is too many concerning sexual abusers inside the Christian faith and SBC local church life and ministries.

We have always had “bad guys” inside the church, but this reason is unacceptable to not address the issue, and likewise our historic polity structure of local church autonomy. The Apostle Paul named a few fallen persons in some of his letters.

– The report states that a small group of key convention leaders and outside legal counsel covered up this situation and, sadly, misdirected persons speaking about being abused by clergy and church leaders. These key leaders acted in a shameful way in not responding in a straightforward manner.

Something could and should have been done about these serious concerns and allegations. Many of these abused persons and their spokesmen were shunned, mistreated, ridiculed, and threatened.

– It has come to light that over the last twenty years, a list of accused abusers in SBC churches and ministries was compiled but not acted on in any way by SBC Executive Committee leaders.

The old saw from them was, “We knew some stuff, but did not want to do anything about it.” The new line will be, “We know now and something will be done about it.”

– All denominations have their pedophiles, sexual abusers, and scandals. In our county, we have recently had two former United Methodist Church ministers arrested for child molestation. One is now in prison.

The Roman Catholic Church has often been in the news over the last two decades with wayward and wicked priests. Our case is that we are the second largest, and often loudest, group in

the Christian faith in the USA and thus an easy target.

When your friends, neighbors, and work associates ridicule us for this abuse scandal, tell them it should not have happened, our leaders are addressing it, and – most of all – you should act like a Christian in this uncomfortable situation.

Tell them it is a miniscule number of ministers, but the small group of key leaders at the top of the SBC made missteps that hurt everyone. Be honest about it! Don't hide it! Most of all, don't laugh it off. It is a serious matter.

– What will happen at the 2022 SBC Annual Meeting June 14-15 in Anaheim, Ca.? This topic will be at the forefront of discussion and action. We can only wait, pray, and see what the messengers from local churches who attend will adopt. I am praying that much good will come out of this meeting.

– This issue impacts our church. How, you ask? We have been and will remain diligent to protect all persons (young, old, female, and male) from sexual abuse and other harms. Our key leaders have been part of sexual and criminal background checks. We follow stringent rules for ministry to minors.

You need to know that if sexual abuse or harm is done to minors, all key leaders are required to report this to church staff and then to law enforcement. We are mandatory reporters of suspected minor sexual abuse, as well as elder abuse.

A good rule of thumb is, "If it doesn't look right, likely it is not." Report what you suspect or troubles you to key leaders (pastoral staff, deacon body chair, and executive committee chair). This action is a great deterrent to abuse.

– Please remember that over 99% (in my humble estimation) of all SBC key leaders in local churches and ministries are God-fearing, loving, and honest men and women of Jesus Christ. Until I know differently, I will respect and work with this team of godly servants.

The less-than-one-percent is unacceptable and causes serious hurt and harm to the cause of Christ and human beings. Often the news media makes it sound like half of our preachers and deacons are guilty. That is simply not the case.

– We will not leave the Southern Baptist Convention. I told my two children, “I will trust you as long as you give me good reasons to trust you.” Any family is hurt when parents, leaders, authority figures, and persons of influence abuse their positions and are protected by people who fear the bad publicity toward that family or entity.

I trusted these key SBC leaders who are being accused of covering up evils. Our church will seek to fulfill the biblical duties of care, protection, and good works to all ages and persons. We will pray, watch, and see what and how our SBC leaders will do.

I am a loyal SBC member, but we have a greater loyalty to the cause and commission of Jesus Christ. I do not have all the answers to this heartbreaking situation, but I’m going to be patient with our Convention and diligent in our church as your pastor.

– We are not “hiding our heads in the sand,” hoping this will go away or the troublemakers will disappear. Our key leaders must address this situation. Please pray for all key leaders to take only Christ-honoring actions.

– Lastly, our society is currently in the spiritual tsunami of a carnal, sex-crazed, and violent age (the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, is one example of this depravity). The Bible challenges each of us to be sober-minded, loving, Spirit-led, full of integrity, and deeply obedient to the Lord and His Word.

We have no other guidelines. If you are out of line with the Lord, you can repent and be renewed. Many of us are testimonies of His renewal from hurt, habit, or hang-up by His

grace and mercy.

Satan is pictured in God's Word as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). He goes after pulpits, parents, principals, power-brokers, persons of influence, and people who can pervert and do harm to what God has created to be good and a blessing.

Watch, walk, and worship carefully in Him. Remember that He is still God alone and leads us to know and do His will. With His help, keep yourself in His love and in the center of His will.

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