

SBC president distances convention from Johnny Hunt 'restoration'

FAMERSVILLE, Texas (Special) – A former Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) leader accused of sexually assaulting another pastor's wife returned to the pulpit Jan. 15, despite criticism from the current SBC president.

"I would permanently 'defrock' Johnny Hunt if I had the authority to do so. In a fellowship of autonomous churches, I do not have the authority to do so," said Bart Barber, pastor of First Church, Farmersville, Texas, who is serving his first term as SBC president, in a November 2022 Internet blog titled, "Praisegod barebones: The Online Musings of Bart Barber."

Hunt is a former two-term SBC president, senior vice president of evangelism and leadership at the SBC North American Mission Board, and longtime senior pastor of First Church, Woodstock, Ga.

According to a report by an independent company hired to conduct a wide-ranging investigation into the mishandling of sexual abuse allegations by the SBC hierarchy, Hunt had contact with the pastor's wife in a rented condominium in Florida. After first denying the incident, Hunt eventually termed the encounter as "brief and improper" but consensual – the latter a characterization with which the woman disagreed.

Hunt, who is married, subsequently submitted himself to four pastors with which he is friendly to serve as a "restoration" group. Six months after the accusations went public, the group pronounced Hunt fit to return to ministry.

Barber took issue with the restoration process in his November

2022 blog entry. “The idea that a council of pastors, assembled with the consent of the abusive pastor, possesses some authority to declare a pastor fit for resumed ministry is a conceit that is altogether absent from Baptist polity and from the witness of the New Testament. Indeed, it is repugnant to all that those sources extol and represent.

“It is best for people just to regard this pronouncement as the individual opinions of four of Johnny Hunt’s loyal friends. These four pastors do not speak for the Southern Baptist Convention.”

Hunt has not publicly responded to Barber’s remarks, but returned to the pulpit Jan. 15 at Hiland Park Church in Panama City, Fla. The church, which Hunt joined last year, is led by Stephen Kyle, one of the pastors in the restoration group.

In his sermon, Hunt cited Psalm 119. A portion of the Scripture passage he quoted was, “⁸⁴How long must your servant endure? When will you judge those who persecute me? ⁸⁵The insolent have dug pitfalls for me; they do not live according to your law. ⁸⁶All your commandments are sure; they persecute me with falsehood; help me!” (ESV).

“And by the way,” Hunt asked, “have you ever made a choice that you wish you could undo, but you can’t undo it? What do you do with stuff you can’t undo? You give it to Jesus.”