

# Barber discusses sexual abuse, Law amendment

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JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (BP)—In a conversation spanning nearly 90 minutes and covering much-discussed topics in Southern Baptist Convention life, SBC President Bart Barber answered questions from the pastor of First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla.

Pastor Heath Lambert had solicited questions from church members, and they were submitted in advance.

One question concerned ways Southern Baptists could reach out better to those who “hate us and our message, but who are just as lost as we once were.”

Barber said one way is to live in accordance with the message.

“We say that we believe that everyone who hasn’t received the gospel of Jesus Christ is going to spend eternity in hell separated from God,” he said. “But we’ll have family members or colleagues that we love, that we never even share the gospel with them to try to invite them to faith in Christ.”

He listed sexual ethics and responding to criticism as other areas where many Christians fail to live up to their stated ideals.

“The fact is the gospel is designed to work even in spite of our hypocrisies and our problems,” said Barber, pastor of First Baptist Church in Farmersville.

“But it works all the better when we’re prepared to admit our hypocrisies and our problems and be a little more transparent for people to be able to see that we’re working on it and we’re making progress.”

# Dealing with sexual abuse in churches

Nearly 20 minutes of the conversation dealt with confronting sexual abuse, a major issue in the SBC in recent years. Barber said he often talks with church leaders who are “deer in the headlights shocked” when they discover sexual abuse has occurred in their church.

The problem goes beyond the SBC, Barber said, noting the Catholic Church, public schools, USA Women’s Gymnastics, the entertainment industry and other institutions that have dealt with sexual abuse.

The sexual revolution and the ubiquity of pornography are among reasons for “a societal epidemic of sexual dysfunction and sexual sin and sexual abuse that’s happening all around us,” Barber said.

Many churches have failed to handle sexual abuse cases properly, often because they didn’t know what to do, he said.

“When I went to seminary, I got taught nothing—nothing—about how to handle clergy sexual abuse or volunteer sexual abuse in the church,” Barber said. “It just wasn’t a subject that was on anybody’s radar 30 years ago.

“Part of what we need to do is try to help churches know how to prevent abuse and also help churches know at least this is who to call when you encounter an abuse situation in your church.”

## Working toward sex abuse reform

He then addressed the handling of abuse allegations submitted to the SBC Executive Committee—the subject of a major investigation and report released in May 2022.

“What that investigation found after looking hard to see if they could find a time when the convention or the Executive Committee knew about abuse and failed to report it or facilitated an abuser being able to continue to abuse, they didn’t find any instances where the convention or the Executive Committee did that,” Barber said.

Rather, he said, many times abuse has been mishandled by individual churches. And when survivors informed the Executive Committee about some of those instances, SBC and Executive Committee leaders “did not want to hear that and mistreated some of those folks who were coming and making those claims.”

But Southern Baptists have a heart for dealing with sexual abuse, he said.

“Messengers have voted twice to authorize us to go forward with sex abuse reform,” he said. “And we’re able to put some things together to help churches that understand who Southern Baptists are and respond to our unique vulnerabilities to sexual abuse and sexual predation.”

Such reforms are expensive, and Barber acknowledged the SBC Executive Committee has experienced financial strain the last few years. The SBC has always operated on a “shoestring budget,” he said, because “we’ve always wanted to send all the money that we could to the mission boards.”

In coming years, “the decisions that we’re going to face are not decisions about whether we have enough money to continue to operate,” he said. “The decisions we’re going to face are how to allocate our money to be able to cover the things that we need to do.”

## **Questions raised about female pastors**

Lambert said the category that garnered by far the largest number of questions was the issue of female pastors.

In June at the SBC annual meeting in Indianapolis, messengers will vote on a constitutional amendment that has come to be known as the “Law amendment” after Mike Law, the Virginia pastor who submitted the motion calling for it.

Lambert asked if the amendment would require churches to limit the pastoral office to men.

“The SBC already requires that churches limit the office of pastor to men without the Law amendment,” Barber said, recounting the lopsided votes at the 2023 meeting in New Orleans to remove two churches from friendly cooperation with the SBC based on this issue.

Barber said he agrees with Law’s theology, but he does not think the amendment is necessary because the SBC already has a mechanism by which to deem churches not in friendly cooperation.

The amendment also could be used against churches that espouse complementarian theology but have a woman on staff whose title may include the word “pastor” but who does not function as an overseer of the church, Barber said.

“I think that when we face extremely confusing and convoluted questions, we ought to just let the messenger body pray about it and sort that out,” he said. “We have the framework in place right now without any amendment.”

## **What is a cooperating SBC church?**

Lambert asked Barber about the SBC Cooperation Group, a group appointed by Barber and tasked with evaluating the SBC’s structure and making recommendations to messengers in Indianapolis.

Barber said many are concerned the standing Credentials Committee, created in recent years, could create a “Baptist Bureau” with the authority

to determine whether a congregation belongs in the SBC or not.

“I just think that’s in some ways contrary to Baptist principles about letting the people vote on important things like that question,” he said.

“Our constitution explicitly says that you don’t have to agree with everything in the Baptist Faith and Message to be a part of the Southern Baptist Convention. And we have this very vague language where nobody’s told what parts you have to agree with, what parts you don’t have to agree with.”

He said the SBC constitution deliberately is vague in some areas “to allow the convention to make decisions about those sorts of things.”

“But it’s a nightmare when you hand it to a committee of eight to 10 people and say, ‘Apply this, and here’s a vague standard, and nobody’s going to tell you what the rules are. ...’ And most of the time, the messengers will never even see these or get to vote on them at all.

“... We’re not like the Catholics. We’re not a hierarchical structured denomination. We’re a convention of cooperating churches that respects what the convention actually is and it puts the decision-making authority where it belongs—in the hands of the messengers who come from our churches.”