

# Judge dismisses lawsuit against Patterson and seminary

April 6, 2023

A judge dismissed a former seminary student's negligence and defamation charges against Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and its former president, Paige Patterson.

The student—identified as Jane Roe—maintained she was stalked and sexually assaulted multiple times by a seminary student employee—identified as John Doe.

She asserted the seminary and its president at the time not only failed to stop the assaults, but also that Patterson—acting in his capacity as seminary president—defamed her.

## Summary judgments granted

In a [52-page April 4 ruling](#), U.S. District Judge Sean Jordan granted petitions by Patterson and the seminary for partial summary judgment. Jordan ordered the defamation claims “dismissed with prejudice,” meaning the case cannot be refiled with the same evidence.



Paige Patterson preaches at the Southwestern Baptist Theological

Seminary campus in Fort Worth during his time as president there.  
(File Photo / Courtesy of SWBTS)

The judge on March 25 similarly had granted other petitions for partial summary judgment and [ordered negligence claims](#) likewise “dismissed with prejudice.”

The judge dismissed the negligence claims six days prior to the [scheduled trial date](#), and he dismissed the defamation claims two days after the trial had been slated to start.

The lawsuit alleged that prior to an October 2015 meeting Jane Roe arranged with Patterson, the seminary’s chief of campus security asked if Patterson wanted him to attend. The suit stated Patterson replied in an email, “I have to break her down and I may need no official types there, but let me see.”

Both Patterson and the seminary disputed allegations in the lawsuit regarding Roe’s interaction with seminary officials. Patterson stated he “was not a cause, the cause, the sole cause, a proximate cause, the sole proximate cause, or a contributing cause of any injuries or damages claimed by Roe.”

## **Negligence claims dismissed**

In his March 25 order, the judge stated Patterson’s approach “may well have been misguided and inappropriate,” but he said the email in which he used the phrase “break her down” did not demonstrate the alleged sexual assaults were foreseeable to Patterson or the seminary.

Roe claimed women who tried to report sexual harassment and sexual abuse at the seminary “were ignored, dismissed or disciplined themselves,”

but the judge called that assertion “a gross distortion of the evidence before the court.”

“The proposition that SWBTS has a history of condoning sexual assault or sexual harassment of female students has not been proven by Roe and is not supported by the record in this case,” Jordan wrote.

The judge stated Roe failed to make any sexual harassment or sexual assault complaint prior to August 2015—“months after the sexual assaults allegedly occurred.”

“At that time, Patterson and SWBTS immediately notified local law enforcement authorities of Roe’s outcry, and Roe was interviewed by the Fort Worth Police Department,” the judge wrote. “Roe declined to pursue charges against Doe.”

The judge did not find sufficient legal evidence to proceed with charges that either Patterson or the seminary reasonably could have intervened in advance to protect Roe from alleged assaults.

## **Defamation claims dismissed**

In the April 4 order, the judge noted alleged defamation of Roe stemmed from public defense of Patterson in the weeks surrounding two trustee board meetings in May 2018 that led to Patterson’s termination as president, largely over his perceived disrespect toward women.



Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary trustee chairman Kevin Ueckert (left) addresses trustees at a special called meeting at the Fort Worth campus. The board met to discuss the controversy surrounding Paige Patterson (right), then president of the seminary. (File Photo by Adam Covington/SWBTS via BP)

Defamation claims specifically focused on blog posts, press releases by Patterson's attorney, a media interview with Patterson's attorney and a letter from a seminary donor to a seminary trustee.

Roe also claimed Patterson defamed her in May 2016 through communication with Patricia Ennis, a professor at the seminary, in which he allegedly told her Doe possessed nude photos of Roe, which he implied were obtained during a consensual relationship.

Roe also asserted she subsequently was defamed in a May 22, 2018, meeting of the seminary board of trustees.

The judge ruled Roe failed to demonstrate either Patterson or the seminary wrote or published any of the documents cited or in other communication.

While the judge found a document Patterson's attorney prepared could be defamatory, Roe failed to prove she suffered damages as a result.

The orders by the judge do not pass judgement on whether Roe was sexually assaulted by a seminary student worker. Rather they focused specifically on the issues of defamation and negligence on the part of Patterson and the seminary.

## **Responses from board chair and attorney**

Danny Roberts, current chair of the board of trustees at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, issued a statement [quoted April 6 by Baptist Press](#): "We are grateful that the court has determined that the facts in this case did not meet the standard established by the law and has dismissed all claims.

"Still, we recognize that the biblical standard for responding to allegations of abuse and caring for victims of abuse is much higher. It was a failure to live up to this higher standard that led, in part, to a presidential transition in 2018.

"Southwestern Seminary remains committed to the biblical standard, which demands doing everything we can to ensure the safety of all members of the seminary community and caring well for victims of sexual abuse."

Baptist Press also reported Roe's attorney, Sheila Haddock, said an appeal on the ruling is likely.

"We are disappointed in the court's rulings on Ms. Roe's claims and are preparing our appeal," Haddock told Baptist Press. "We were ready for trial and looking forward to finally being able to present the ample evidence supporting Ms. Roe's allegations to a jury. We are still hopeful we will have

that opportunity.

“In the meantime, we encourage the media and the public to refrain from trying this case on social media by drawing inferences and reaching conclusions based on the extremely limited and skewed information currently available in the sealed court record.”

*EDITOR’S NOTE: The last six paragraphs were added after the article originally was posted to include responses from Danny Roberts and Sheila Haddock.*