

# Paul Pressler, SBC legend accused of abuse, is dead at 94

June 17, 2024

(RNS)—Paul Pressler, a retired Texas judge and one of the most influential evangelicals of the past 50 years, has died.

Pressler, 94, died June 7, but his death largely went unnoticed until Baptist News Global, an independent Baptist news site, [reported](#) the news of his funeral on June 15, held at the George H. Lewis and Sons Funeral Home in Houston.

Pressler was one of the chief architects of the “Conservative Resurgence,” also known as the fundamentalist takeover, that changed the course of the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and 1990s, turning it into a decidedly conservative theological denomination with deep ties to the Republican Party.

As a member of the [Council for National Policy](#), a conservative think tank, he helped forge ties between the GOP and the nation’s largest Protestant denomination.

Pressler was nominated to run the Office of Government Ethics under President George H. W. Bush but withdrew when a background investigation found “ethics problems,” the Washington Post [reported](#).

But in recent years, Pressler became known mostly as a symbol of the SBC’s sexual abuse crisis. In 2017, a former Pressler assistant named Gerald Duane Rollins Jr. sued Pressler, claiming the older man abused him for decades.

The suit, which named Pressler, the SBC and other Baptist entities, finally

was settled in December, with all the accused denying any wrongdoing.

In January of this year, a lawyer for the SBC, Gene Besen, called Pressler a “[monster](#)” who had leveraged his “power and false piety” to sexually abuse young men.

“The man’s actions are of the devil,” Besen told Religion News Service at the time, clarifying that he spoke in his personal capacity and not as a representative of the denomination.

## **History of concerns**

In 2004, the same year Pressler first was elected vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention, his home church warned him in a letter about his habit of naked hot tubbing with young men after a college student complained that Pressler had allegedly groped him, [according to \*The Texas Tribune\*](#).

Months later Pressler agreed to pay \$450,000 to settle Rollins’ earlier claim that Pressler had assaulted him in a hotel room. When Pressler stopped making the agreed payments, Rollins sued again, this time alleging sexual abuse.

Some years earlier, at the SBC’s 1996 annual meeting, during the Clinton-era White House scandals, Pressler gave a speech condemning what he saw as a loss of Christian values in the nation.

“Our nation sins when adultery and fornication are no longer a bar for holding high political office and principles of biblical morality and purity are no longer promoted,” he said, according to a clip of his speech posted on X, the site formerly known as Twitter.

“We sin when perversion is promoted and not penalized.”

But Pressler largely had faded into the shadows before news of the lawsuits broke. In 2016, he appeared at the SBC's annual meeting in St. Louis, where he harangued then-SBC President Ronnie Floyd for not letting him speak about a resolution condemning the Confederate battle flag.

The exchange between them was [broadcast](#) on a massive screen at the front of the convention center.

"I was deliberately ignored," Pressler, who opposed the resolution, told Floyd. "I told you last night I was going to speak on this."

Pressler's mic eventually was turned off, and he was ruled out of order.

At the recently concluded 2024 SBC annual meeting in Indianapolis, no mention of Pressler's death was made.

A native of Houston, Pressler attended Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire before earning degrees from Princeton and the University of Texas Law School. He served two years in the Texas Legislature before becoming a district and later appeals court judge.

In 2012, he made national headlines for [hosting](#) a meeting of evangelical leaders at his Texas ranch, aimed at finding an alternative to Mitt Romney in that year's presidential race.

The lawsuit against Pressler [inspired](#) a major investigation into abuse in the SBC by the *Houston Chronicle* and *San Antonio Express-News*, according to *The Texas Tribune*.

That "Abuse of Faith" report led the SBC to [hold](#) a litany of lament for abuse in 2019 and eventually to authorize a third-party investigation by Guidepost Solutions into how SBC leaders dealt with abuse.

[That investigation](#) led to a series of reforms meant to help Southern Baptists deal with the issue of sexual abuse, but the effort has stalled over

the past two years. At the SBC's annual meeting this month, the denomination's Executive Committee was [charged](#) with making those reforms stick.