

# Editorial: Accountability requires more than four pastors

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Once again, Southern Baptists are in the news and, once again, for controversial things. Such is the long tail of wrongdoing. The tail of accountability, however, seems to be much shorter.

## Defining ‘morally inappropriate’

First, it was former Southern Baptist Theological Seminary missions professor David Sills. He lost his teaching position at Southern Seminary in 2018 after revelations of a “morally inappropriate consensual intimate” relationship—his language—with then-student Jennifer Lyell.

Sills is back in the news, because [he is suing](#) Southern Seminary and its president Al Mohler, the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, SBC President Bart Barber and previous SBC president Ed Litton, Lifeway Christian Resources, Guidepost Solutions and Lyell.

He claims this large group of individuals and organizations “conspired with [Lyell] to ruin his reputation.” That’s a wild claim his attorneys will have to prove.

What doesn’t have to be proved is Baptist Press’ role in this “morally inappropriate” situation. Lyell was encouraged by SBC leaders to write a first-person account of what happened with Sills. She called it abuse, but [Baptist Press changed her words](#) to “a ‘morally inappropriate relationship,’” thereby implicating Lyell’s moral character.

[Baptist Press issued a mea culpa](#) Oct. 15, 2019, and pulled the reworded

article from its website. The [Executive Committee apologized](#) to Lyell in February 2022. But the damage was already done—to all involved.

Meanwhile, Sills is not denying a “morally inappropriate relationship” happened. He’s just contending—to the tune of possibly millions of dollars and definitely ruined lives—that “morally inappropriate” involves equal consent, not a power differential.

A question arises: How much accountability is required following a “morally inappropriate relationship?” Is losing a job and a reputation enough? Sills’ lawsuit suggests such is too much. Whatever the court decides, the people of God have their own decision to make. I, for one, believe Jennifer Lyell.

## **Messing up somewhere along the way**

Following hot on the news of Sills’ lawsuit is word of former SBC president, megachurch pastor and SBC North American Mission Board vice president [Johnny Hunt’s plan to return to ministry](#).

Hunt was also involved in a “morally inappropriate relationship” and, like Sills, admitted to it. The Guidepost Solutions investigation brought this to light, detailing a survivor’s report of Hunt’s sexual assault of her in 2010.

During “recent months,” [a group of four pastors](#)—Steven Kyle, Mike Whitson, Mark Hoover and Benny Tate—“worked with Hunt and his wife on an ‘intentional and an intense season of transparency, reflection and restoration.’” I’m sure this is true, and I’d like to believe the four pastors take “morally inappropriate relationships” seriously. But some things trouble me.

As astute as these—or any—four pastors may be in facilitating an “intentional and an intense season of transparency, reflection and

restoration,” I wonder if they are fully equipped to engage Hunt in the sort of accountability required of a spiritual leader accused of sexual abuse.

In their video message, the pastors said Hunt and his wife received private counseling, but of what sort? Was it pastoral counseling, or was it conducted by licensed professionals specializing in sexual abuse? There is a difference.

Hoover said Hunt confessed his wrongdoing in 2010 and underwent a similar process at the time that Hoover called “real ... substantial and ... biblical.” But was restitution involved? At least one other person was involved beyond Hunt. Has Hunt demonstrated appropriate accountability to that person?

Hoover said, “We have seen nothing but godly repentance in Johnny’s life as he’s been forced to face this in such a public way.” What does “godly repentance” look like, concretely? Religious leaders and churches needing to hold their own accountable would like to know.

I am sad to say, it is also fair to be suspicious of a group of four pastors vouching for one of their own to return to ministry. The last, oh, decades have demonstrated this is not always a foolproof means of accountability. To think their word suffices now is, at a minimum, tone deaf.

Tate confessed his motive for helping Hunt is because he doesn’t know anyone in his life and ministry who’s helped pastors more than Hunt has. Kyle echoed the sentiment. I’m glad Hunt has friends who want to help him, but I wonder if that’s all accountability requires. Can four pastors who admire Hunt so much perform the needed accountability with full rigor and objectivity?

I don’t know Steven Kyle, Mike Whitson, Mark Hoover and Benny Tate. I also don’t intend to question their heart. I do intend to ask if restoration of someone who “messed up somewhere along the way”—to use Whitson’s

phrase—needs sanction from at least one other person outside a group of friendly pastors.

## **Accountability requires naming**

At the end of the video featuring the four pastors, Hunt—sitting beside his wife—addressed the camera. He thanked the pastors at length. He expressed some regret, saying, “There are many things I would have done differently.” But what those things are, he didn’t say.

One thing accountability requires is naming the wrong done. Specifically, the wrongdoer must unequivocally state what he or she did wrong. Sills still wants to call his wrongdoing a “morally inappropriate relationship.” In the video, Hunt simply called his “my own moment of public shame and failure.” His shame? Sure, but what of hers?

Vague references are not accountability. Vague references are, in the language of financial accounting, fuzzy math. Too many ministers have been guilty of that, too.

Whether Hunt is called to an SBC church remains to be seen. SBC President [Bart Barber reminded Southern Baptists](#) of the resolution they adopted in 2021 [permanently disqualifying anyone who has committed sexual abuse](#) from holding the office of pastor. That’s pretty concrete—all except whether Sills and Hunt committed sexual abuse or merely engaged in “morally inappropriate relationships.” I, for one, believe their accusers.

[Click here](#) to read a follow up to this editorial.

*Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He can be reached at [eric.black@baptiststandard.com](mailto:eric.black@baptiststandard.com). The views expressed are those solely of the author.*