

Editorial: Who has authority to restore a pastor?

December 7, 2022

The editorial "[Accountability requires more than four pastors](#)" generated a lot of conversation last week among *Baptist Standard* readers. One of them, a Texas Baptist pastor, asked me: "If those four pastors don't have the authority to restore Johnny Hunt, then who does?"

It was a sincere question asked with deep concern. It is also a significant question because of its practical and ecclesiological—church-related—implications.

We need to give the question and its answer serious thought. If there is any doubt, we only need to look at the renewed discussion just days later around [Matt Chandler's return to preaching](#) on Dec. 4.

Summary on Hunt and Chandler

If you don't need this summary, feel free to skip to the next section.

A pastor's wife accused Hunt of sexually assaulting her in 2010 while he was pastor of First Baptist Church in Woodstock, Ga. [Guidepost Solutions detailed the accusation against Hunt](#) in a [report made public](#) May 22, 2022. Hunt denies the incident was sexual assault but [admitted to a "compromising situation" and a "consensual encounter."](#)

After the report was released, Hunt resigned as senior vice president of evangelism and leadership at the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board, where he was serving at the time.

Hunt and his wife then participated in several months of a so-called

“intentional and an intense season of transparency, reflection and restoration” overseen by four pastors—Steven Kyle, Mike Whitson, Mark Hoover and Benny Tate—who, according to SBC President Bart Barber, were “[assembled with the consent of the abusive pastor.](#)” [These four pastors released a video](#) the week of Thanksgiving giving their stamp of approval to Hunt’s return to ministry.

On Aug. 28, Chandler, pastor of The Village Church in Flower Mound, announced to his congregation [he was taking a leave of absence](#), at the elders’ suggestion, after a woman confronted him over his “‘inappropriate messaging’ with [another] woman on Instagram.”

His congregation “cannot be a place that does not hold its pastors and elders accountable,” Chandler said.

[Chandler took that leave of absence.](#) A development plan was crafted by The Village Church’s elders that included professional counseling and a neurological exam. After going through the plan, Chandler was deemed ready to return.

At the beginning of the Dec. 4 worship service, Lead Pastor Josh Patterson declared, “[The elders affirm Matt’s reinstatement to the pulpit.](#)”

Who has authority to restore?

One must remember, in the Baptist context, the local church has full authority to license and ordain *new* ministers. The question, however, is if the local church—via its religious leaders—has the authority to restore a *fallen* minister.

For Baptists, the answer is “yes.” This raises another question, though: Who in the local church? The deacons, the elders, other ministers on staff, the personnel committee, the whole congregation? Baptists will say each

church decides for itself who within the congregation will have that authority.

Baptists believe in the autonomy of the local church and have fought bitter fights over this principle. Under autonomy of the local church, each congregation governs itself, including whether and how it will address clergy wrongdoing.

The problem is such autonomy has been a significant contributor to ongoing abuse—such as the SBC’s sexual abuse scandal. Too many problem ministers have not been held accountable and were allowed to move to another ministry because responsibility was pawned off on local autonomy. Local autonomy doesn’t mean there’s no collective responsibility.

Is centralized governance a solution? Not necessarily, as the Roman Catholic Church has made clear. Leaders protected leaders in the Catholic Church just as they did in Baptist churches and ministries.

What’s “local” in an internet age?

Scope is another issue to consider in deciding who has authority to restore a minister. Authority to restore ought to extend as far as the minister’s and ministry’s reach. Hunt and Chandler are high-profile ministers with national, if not international, reach. Their churches called them and kept them for that reason; the churches want a wide reach.

Chandler acknowledged the scope of his reach when he told congregants on Dec. 4, “Chances of your stuff ever being made public and [making Salon](#) is probably slim.” Though his congregants might not gain national attention, Chandler will.

A consequence of being high-profile is that when something goes wrong, it’s not just the minister in the national spotlight; the church or ministry is,

too. So are the minister's victims, even if the wider public doesn't know their names and faces. And so are associated ministries.

In addition to being pastor of The Village Church, Chandler was president of Acts 29 Network. In light of Chandler's leave of absence from The Village, [Acts 29 asked him to step aside](#) from its speaking engagements. Whether Acts 29 was involved in his development plan and reinstatement was not stated in Patterson's and Chandler's remarks on Dec. 4.

Ironically, Chandler had a cold Sunday morning. Patterson invited the elders to gather around Chandler on stage to pray over him and told them if they catch the flu, "You're fine." Chandler assured them, "It's just a cold," to which Patterson responded: "It's just a cold. It's always just a cold," by which I'm sure he meant it's no less contagious—just like sin.

Taking responsibility

I took my dog for a walk through the park this morning. She chose to relieve herself right in front of the playground. No one needs to step in that. So, as a responsible, city-dwelling dog walker, I picked up her mess with the plastic bag carried for that purpose.

Unlike my dog, misbehaving religious leaders need to take responsibility for their own mess. When they don't or won't, the church is obligated to make sure the mess is taken care of. Holding the offending minister responsible and accountable is not an option. No one coming along behind needs to step in the minister's mess.

Sometimes taking care of the mess means the minister, who can be personally restored, isn't restored to ministry. It always means the minister taking full responsibility for his or her wrongdoing.

Restoration is more than reinstating a minister. It's restoring all parties

involved in the wrongdoing. Who has the authority to do that? The answer isn't in a person's title; it's in godly character—the kind not always demonstrated by religious leaders.

A final thought

Whatever restoration looks like for a religious leader and whoever signs off on that restoration, at least two things are a bare minimum for a minister restored to ministry.

One, a religious leader's misdeed(s) must be known beyond a closed circle of other leaders. Not every detail needs to be known to the public, but enough of the bare facts need to be divulged to the full congregation or ministry, and possibly beyond, to ensure full accountability takes place.

Two, upon restoration, the full ministry must know the bare facts about what the religious leader has been restored from. Partnering ministries should also know. And any ministry to which the restored religious leader goes next must know the bare facts of what the religious leader did so it can make an informed decision about calling that minister to serve.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The last sentence of paragraph five was updated Dec. 9 to clarify what Johnny Hunt denies and to what he admits. His open letter containing the quoted phrases can be [read here](#).

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