

Editorial: The Guidepost report, anger and what comes next

May 25, 2022

Are you angry? I am.

I'm angry that 19 children and two adults were killed yesterday at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde by yet another mass shooter. Many of us are still angry that 10 Black people were killed in a grocery store in Buffalo, N.Y., by yet another mass shooter.

More needs to be said—and done—about these horrific tragedies than I can say here.

I'm also angry that unknown numbers of people—children and adults—were sexually abused by Southern Baptist ministers, *and* that many of the abused were disbelieved, gaslighted, delegitimized, demonized, blown off, resisted, stymied and stonewalled, and by none other than Southern Baptist leaders.

It's OK for us to be honest about our anger. Some things should make us angry. Senseless and preventable gun violence should make us angry. When religious leaders put self-preservation before caring for hurting people, we should be angry.

At the same time, we must go beyond anger. We must respond to what has been done, and we must do it in a way that honors Christ by caring more for people than preserving institutions and power.

Anger

Since the public release of [the report](#) of Guidepost's investigation of how the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee handled sexual

abuse allegations, several ministry leaders have expressed to me their anger at certain SBC leaders and those who enabled them.

At least one minister wanted me to provide a “30-second” explanation of what’s going on with the SBC. We spent closer to 30 minutes talking. There is no 30-second explanation for decades of what the report calls “resistance, stonewalling, and even outright hostility” toward sexual abuse survivors.

There’s also no 30-second response to sexual abuse and SBC mishandling of it. The effects of sexual abuse are too far-reaching, and the literal adding insult to injury through decades of self-preservation—institutional and individual—compounds the trauma experienced by sexual abuse survivors in SBC churches and institutions.

Wrong responses

Not long after the report went public May 22, some of those identified for wrongdoing issued public responses denying or criticizing statements about them in the report. Some of those responses are collected [here](#). Be sure to read them with a critical eye.

As much as those individuals want to clear their names, their protestations merely echo what sexual abuse survivors have heard for decades. It’s the wrong response. Let’s not copy it.

Many Baptists—Southern and otherwise—are seeking to distance themselves from those named in the report. Some Southern Baptists are talking about leaving the SBC or reducing their connection to it.

As much as these individuals and churches don’t want to be guilty by association or held responsible for the wrongs and failures of a particular group of Southern Baptist leaders, their efforts are a mirror

image—protestations in reverse—of SBC leaders’ denials, basically saying, “We’re not responsible.”

Some degree of separation—not isolation—may be appropriate for some individuals and churches, but by itself, it’s not an adequate response.

Shared responsibility

We may separate in one sense, but in another sense, we are still responsible for the whole body. Paul taught and we believe: “For we are all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body ... If one part suffers, every part suffers” (1 Corinthians 12:13, 26).

When SBC leaders put liability and preserving the base before caring for hurting people, what they seem to ignore is how this prioritization affects an entire convention, as well as other Christians.

We may be among the innocent, not the guilty, but as followers of Christ, it’s still our problem. We may be able to distance ourselves from the guilty parties, but the effects will still affect us and others.

It might not be fair, and we may resent it. As someone said in one of my conversations over the last few days, “It may not be your fault, but it is your problem.”

Asserting our innocence in any way is the wrong response. Relieving others of their responsibility is also a wrong response. The right response is accepting there is no getting away from the problem. We must take it on.

SBC leaders have particular responsibility for leadership failures. Meanwhile, all of us—Southern Baptist or not, leader or not—have a responsibility to address sexual abuse and to care for those abused.

Taking responsibility

One effect of the report's revelations is we cannot expect the average person to trust us anymore—if they still did. Trust is currency, and we've thought we were flush with it, enough to burn some. We must assume we are bankrupt and have to build again from zero.

I can hear the protests now: “But *we* didn't do anything wrong. *I've* never abused anyone. *We* don't condone sexual abuse. *Our* ministry is safe.”

The people named in the report were supposed to be trusted. They and their ministries were supposed to be safe. They assured us.

We may want to distance ourselves and our churches from those who permitted sex abusers to lead in ministry and those who stonewalled or denigrated abuse survivors, but we shouldn't expect the average person to buy our assertions of innocence.

What we should expect is the average person doesn't trust us. We have to assume they are suspicious of us and that we must earn their trust. Trust—*that* is a gospel issue if there ever was one.

Sexual abuse is our problem

Sexual abuse in the church is *our* problem. Ministers not held to account is *our* problem. Denominational leaders, whoever and wherever they are, who mishandle sexual abuse allegations and mistreat survivors of sexual abuse is *our* problem.

Those who committed sexual abuse; covered it up; gaslighted, stonewalled and denigrated sexual abuse survivors—they must take responsibility for their actions and face the consequences.

At the same time, all of us must reject and cease the decades-old pattern of prioritizing institutional self-preservation over people. We also must understand the problem isn't adequately addressed by separating ourselves from the guilty parties.

An adequate response involves building trust, however uncomfortable and embarrassing it may be, however long it takes, even if we aren't the guilty parties.

We must build trust, because trust matters if people are to believe anything we say about how much Jesus loves them. Trust matters if we want people to trust Jesus. And part of trusting Jesus is being honest about our wrongdoing, our failure, our sin.

Another part of trusting Jesus is being more concerned with another person's wholeness than our innocence.

There is a profoundly hurting world around us. We have a lot of work to do, and we can't just be angry. We also have to care for others the way Jesus told us to do.

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