

Commentary: Why Paige Patterson's apology may not be enough

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(RNS) — In just two weeks, Paige Patterson has done what none could have predicted: He's given America's largest Protestant denomination two black eyes.

The first injury was inflicted when his comments about spousal abuse and women went viral. The statements, which span decades, include objectifying a 16-year-old girl in a sermon, saying "everyone should own at least one" woman, and advising abused women to return home and "be submissive in every way."

The second injury came when Patterson responded to the controversy by standing stalwart and claiming he had nothing for which to apologize. For 13 days, he folded his arms while Southern Baptists were thrown into chaos. For 13 days, he dismissed reporters' questions and shrugged off his critics. For 13 days, he ignored a cavalcade of women—[including 3,000 from his own denomination](#)—who practically begged him to make amends for his dangerous comments.

On Thursday (May 10), however, [Patterson released](#) a three-paragraph statement apologizing that his comments "lacked clarity" and "wounded" some women. While I do not doubt the sincerity of his statement, I'm troubled by its substance. After all, the statement was part-apology and part-excuse. Patterson claimed the matter could be attributed to a "failure to be as thoughtful and careful in my extemporaneous expression as I should have been."

In theological terms, Patterson sees his comments as a snafu rather than a sin. But the advice he offered to victims of domestic abuse and the ways in which he has spoken about women in general is neither a mere mistake nor the result of carelessness. It is wrong and contradicts the Bible's unambiguous teachings on violence and marriage.

While any apology is arguably better than none, it's doubtful that such a statement will placate his fiercest critics, who will likely see this as far too little, far too late. It will take more than a tepid apology to ease the pain caused by these types of statements, which have emboldened men for decades to mistreat countless women. You cannot untangle that legacy in just three paragraphs.

We have seen this movie before. From Hollywood actors to prominent pastors, the pattern is all too familiar. The film opens with a scene in which a celebrated leader is accused of misbehavior. Rather than apologize, the leader circles the wagons. The community is scandalized at mounting accusations, but rather than attempt to heal the harm, the leader responds with denials, silence and conspiracy theories. But then reporters begin sniffing and more evidence inevitably surfaces. When it becomes clear that he's been caught red-handed and the neighbors know, the leader offers a forced apology in hopes that the rest of us will forget the matter.

Move along, folks, there's nothing to see here.

But Southern Baptists cannot move on. Because their denomination has been unexpectedly thrust into a larger cultural conversation about the mistreatment of women and institutions' failures to protect them from powerful men who misbehave. Their commitment to the safety and dignity of women has now been called into question.

After such a failure of leadership and failure of judgment, it's up to Patterson to right the ship. Will he withdraw from delivering the coveted

keynote at the Southern Baptist Convention in June, knowing that his speaking will be a distraction and make matters worse? And what of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary? The school's enrollment has declined dramatically under Patterson's leadership, and he has now become so toxic that his presence will make it even more difficult for them to attract incoming students.

In either case, it will take a much heavier dose of humility for Patterson to step aside in service to the institutions and people he claims to love.

The views expressed in this commentary do not necessarily reflect those of Religion News Service or the Baptist Standard.