



Tuesday, November 29, 2022

For Immediate Release

In 2021, the messengers of the Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting adopted a resolution “On Abuse and Pastoral Qualifications.” I was a member of that committee. I contributed significantly to the content of this resolution. It reads, in part, “any person who has committed sexual abuse is permanently disqualified from holding the office of pastor.” This is the sentiment of the Southern Baptist Convention.

At that same meeting, the messengers overwhelmingly insisted that an independent investigation should be conducted about the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee’s response to allegations of sexual abuse. The result of that investigation was the publication of a report in May of this year by Guidepost Solutions. That report disclosed the details of a pastor’s wife’s account of an incident in which Johnny Hunt aggressively approached her for a sexual encounter, including his pulling down her pants, pinning her down, pulling up her shirt, and sexually assaulting her with his hands and his mouth. In relation to this episode, Guidepost Solutions stated in their report, “our investigators found the pastor and his wife to be credible; their report was corroborated in part by a counseling minister and three other credible witnesses; and our investigators did not find Dr. Hunt’s statements related to the sexual assault allegation to be credible.” Guidepost identified and interviewed multiple witnesses who had first-hand knowledge of Hunt’s involvement in events that ensued after the assault.

In response to the investigation and report, Hunt told a succession of contradicting accounts. Guidepost Solutions reported that Hunt denied ever being in the location where the assault took place and denied ever having had any contact with her. After the report was published, Hunt at first “vigorously den[ied]” that he “had abused anyone,” and then later admitted “I chose to enter her condo” and he had a “brief but improper” relationship with her.

The North American Mission Board ended their employment relationship with Johnny Hunt. Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary announced their intention to remove Johnny Hunt’s name from an academic chair at the school. Pastor Jeremy Morton, who succeeded Hunt at FBC Woodstock, GA, said, “One incident of abuse in any place or any church is a tragedy and it cannot be ignored.”

In 2022, the messengers of the Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting adopted a resolution “On Lament and Repentance for Sexual Abuse.” In the text of that resolution, the Convention said, “we...unreservedly apologize to survivors mentioned in the report...for our not heeding their collective warnings and taking swift action to address clergy sexual abuse sooner.” The survivor in the Johnny Hunt account is one of the “survivors mentioned in the report,” although I do not know her name or any other aspect of her identity.

Recently a panel of four pastors—Mark Hoover of NewSpring Church in Wichita, KS; Mike Whitson of First Baptist Church, Indian Trail, NC; Steven Kyle of Hiland Park Baptist Church in Panama City, FL; and Benny Tate of Rock Springs Church in Milner, GA—declared that Johnny Hunt has completed a restoration program and is ready to embark again upon professional ministry.

I would permanently “defrock” Johnny Hunt if I had the authority to do so. In a fellowship of autonomous churches, I do not have the authority to do so. Yet it must be said that neither do these four pastors have the authority to declare Johnny Hunt to be “restored.” They do not speak for the Southern Baptist Convention. Indeed, it is not clear that they even speak for their own churches. For those Southern Baptist churches who practice



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ordination to ministry, the authority to ordain is generally considered to arise from the congregation, but no indication has been given that any of these four congregations have consented to or given their authority to this process. Also, Jeremy Morton and FBC Woodstock have explicitly stated that they had nothing to do with this process. Although Johnny Hunt's church membership has apparently been at Hiland for several months now, FBC Woodstock is the church at which the offensive actions took place. The idea that a council of pastors, assembled with the consent of the abusive pastor, possesses some authority to declare a pastor fit for resumed ministry is a conceit that is altogether absent from Baptist polity and from the witness of the New Testament. Indeed, it is repugnant to all that those sources extol and represent.

It is best for people just to regard this pronouncement as the individual opinions of four of Johnny Hunt's loyal friends. These four pastors do not speak for the Southern Baptist Convention. The voice of the Southern Baptist Convention is best found in the text of the resolutions adopted by the messengers and referenced above.

Pastor Tate, his voice breaking with emotion, cited Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan, saying that he didn't want to be guilty of leaving Johnny Hunt wounded on the side of the road. The wounded person on the side of the road is the abuse survivor, not Johnny Hunt, and she received no mention at all by this panel—she was passed by, in a way, by this quintet. I do not know her, but I don't want to be guilty of leaving her on the side of the road. I am praying for her, I have heard her, and I believe her.