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## Russell Moore to ERLC trustees: 'They want me to live in psychological terror'

*In February 2020, the president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission defended himself after a second task force was mounted to investigate complaints against him.*



Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, speaks June 12, 2019, during the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention at the Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex in Birmingham, Alabama. RNS photo by Butch Dill

June 2, 2021

By *Religion News Service*

*(RNS) — The below letter, recently obtained by Religion News Service, was sent in early 2020 to the trustees of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission by its then-president, Russell Moore. We publish it here without changes or corrections, including Moore's misspelling of Rachael Denhollander's name.*

February 24, 2020

Russell D. Moore  
President  
Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission  
Southern Baptist Convention  
901 Commerce Street, Suite 901  
Nashville, Tennessee

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901 Commerce Street, Suite 901  
Nashville, Tennessee

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This past week all I could think about was the Jordan River.

This is because I realized that the twentieth of this month was the thirty-seventh anniversary of my baptism at Woolmarket Baptist Church, my home congregation in Biloxi, Mississippi. I remember that day well. I remember the way the heated water bubbled around me, as I trembled with nervousness. I remember hearing those words from my pastor, words that I would in later years say myself over and over again: "In obedience to the command of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and upon your profession of faith in Him, I baptize you my brother, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

But what I remember, right before being plunged beneath that water, was looking at the painted backdrop of that baptistery: a scene of the banks of the Jordan River, reminding me, and all of us, that where I was then, Jesus had been before me.

Because I had heard the gospel in that church, had met Jesus there, and because I had seen so many signposts of love and integrity there — even when I couldn't see it elsewhere — I responded to the call of God to serve Jesus in vocational ministry, preaching the gospel and serving alongside the people I loved — Southern Baptists.

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And over the past twenty-five years, that's what I have done. God gave me the opportunity to lead people to Christ and to baptize them in Southern Baptist churches, to help people through their marriage crises in Southern Baptist churches, to help welcome orphaned children into families in Southern Baptist churches, to do evangelism and Bible teaching in prisons and homeless shelters, through Southern Baptist churches. And God allowed me to teach and to lead in the training of young pastors, leaders, and missionaries — with my students scattered all over the world.

And, of course, seven years ago, you were kind enough to elect me to serve as your president. Since then, thanks to you and to the team we have assembled here, we have seen incredible things happen.

Before I say anything else, let me say “thank you” to every one of you. Your support in the letter of the past week brought Maria and me both to tears of gratitude. More than that, even, your pastoral care for us, each one of you, is something I will never ever forget. Because in my talking with you at our meeting, my mind was so scattered by the stress of all that happened, I wanted to take the time to write down for you all some of the things I tried to communicate then, but don't know if I was calm enough to be able to communicate adequately.

At every single vote of the Southern Baptist Convention since I have been president, the messengers of the SBC have encouraged us and affirmed us overwhelmingly, unanimously or virtually unanimously every time. A tiny minority in our denomination knows that, which is why they choose to wait until as far out from a Southern Baptist Convention meeting as possible to do what they do.

Last week's action of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, which you know all about, was just such an action, motivated by an individual, the current chairman of the Executive Committee, who was also involved in a similar action when he had leadership in the Georgia Baptist Convention. This person not only drove the motion, but also saw to it that he would be a member of the “task force,” chairman of it, and the one with the power to elect its membership.

You deserve to hear it from me as to why this is.

The lazy journalistic assessment would be that this is about the President of the United States. This has nothing to do with that. Y'all know my concerns about the perennial temptation toward political captivity

of the gospel, and that will always and perhaps increasingly be a concern in this era. But this is not the issue here. Most Trump voters and supporters have been nothing but kind and encouraging to me — from Southern Baptist laypeople and pastors to Administration officials all the way up and down the ranks. Just as we did with President Obama, we express disagreement where warranted, but we do so respecting the office and doing so requesting a different viewpoint, not engaging in polemics or attack. And when we agree with what the Administration is doing, we say so and work to achieve good public policy as informed by a biblically-grounded ethic, again just as we did when we could under President Obama, and as I did, before I was in this role, with President Bush. The Administration has asked us to take leadership on too many issues to list here — from working on opioid and mental health concerns in faith-based communities to ensuring religious liberty for adoption providers to working on the plight of persecuted Christians and other religious minorities in China and elsewhere.

The presenting issue here is that, first and foremost, of sexual abuse. This Executive Committee, through their bylaws workgroup, “exonerated” churches, in a spur-of-the-moment meeting, from serious charges of sexual abuse cover-up. One of those churches actively had on staff at the time a sex offender. J.D. Greear, our SBC president, and I were critical of this move, believing that it jeopardized not only the gospel witness of the SBC, but, more importantly, the lives of vulnerable children in Southern Baptist churches. Against constant backroom attempts to stop forward momentum, we were able to get across the finish line some modest steps toward addressing the crisis in our convention — the Caring Well Challenge, for instance, and the formation of a credentials committee.

As you know, our last ERLC National Conference was built around the issues of sexual abuse. We said from the beginning that we wanted a place for honest dialogue around these issues, and we would not police anyone from speaking what he or she had experienced or thought. At least one speaker harshly criticized us for not doing enough, or not handling things the way he thought we should. I welcomed that criticism. I learned from it, and was glad that the speaker felt the freedom to do so. At that conference, though, Rachael Denhollender participated with me in a conversation where, again, I refused to censor or stop anything that she had to say. In that conversation, she spoke about her thoughts about the disparagement and poor treatment of a sexual abuse survivor by Executive Committee staff. The story Rachael told is accurate, and Maria and I know that because we were, even during that very meeting, ministering alongside others to that mistreated young woman.

Abuse survivor Rachael Denhollander, right, discusses the Southern Baptist Convention's history of addressing sexual abuse with ERLC President Russell Moore at the Caring Well conference in Dallas, on Oct. 4, 2019. Photo by Karen Race Photography 2019

This enraged some Executive Committee trustee leadership, who communicated that they were incensed that we would allow such a story to be told. That was communicated with special outrage since the Executive Committee had contributed some money to Caring Well as a reason why we should not have allowed this story to be told. I came away from these conversations with the distinct feeling that I was being told (not from Ronnie Floyd, but from sectors of his trustees, mostly the very sector from which this latest action has come), “You’ve got a nice little Commission there; would be a shame if something happened to it.” I told Maria that at the time. It was, and is, chilling — especially seeing what they had in mind to do under cover of darkness.

***I am trying to say this as clearly as I can to you, brothers and sisters: These are the tactics that have been used to create a culture where countless children have been torn to shreds, where women have been raped and then “broken down.”***

Moreover, the same people enraged at this also were enraged that J.D. Greear made the common-sense statement when asked by the press that, while he could not tell a church what to do or who to invite, that giving a “Defender of the Faith Award” and showcasing a man who was dismissed, for very serious cause, by a Southern Baptist entity, over issues including the treatment of vulnerable women, was not a good idea. The same people who moved to create our “investigative task force” wanted to censure J.D.

These decisions were made, I am told, at the officers’ meeting on the Sunday night before the meeting. I was told nothing of it, nor were you, despite the fact that the President of the Executive Committee would have known of it. On the following Monday, I gave my report before the Cooperative Program subcommittee, and was asked nothing but friendly questions not at all related to the so-called “anecdotal” reports of churches decreasing their giving to the CP. They then, the next day, without ever talking to me or to you went into a secret meeting to form yet another secret task force.

The last time they did this, I was “investigated” by a president of their body who was, *at that very moment*, using his pastoral authority to sexually sin. The “task force,” we were told at the time, is just about finding a way to “answer questions.” The headlines then were “Russell Moore and the ERLC Under Investigation for hundreds of churches leaving and defunding the convention.” Their own report showed that the claim was false, but there was no similar trumpeting of those findings. That’s because that’s the point — to keep a cloud over me, and to keep me self-censoring and silent about these matters.

At the same time, the other absolutely draining and unrelenting issue has been that of racial reconciliation. My family and I have faced constant threats from white nationalists and white supremacists, including within our convention. Some of them have been involved in neo-Confederate activities going back for years. Some are involved with groups funded by white nationalist nativist organizations. Some of them have just expressed raw racist sentiment, behind closed doors. They want to deflect the issue to arcane discussions that people do not understand, such as “critical race theory.” There is no Southern Baptist that I know, of any ethnicity, who is motivated by any critical theory but by the text of Ephesians and Galatians and Romans, the Gospels themselves, the framework of Revelation chapters four and five.

From the very beginning of my service, I have been attacked with the most vicious guerilla tactics on such matters, and have been told to be quiet about this by others. One SBC leader who was at the forefront of these behind-closed-doors assaults had already ripped me to shreds verbally for saying, in 2011, that the Southern Baptist Convention should elect an African-American president. This same leader told a gathering that “The Conservative Resurgence is like the Civil War, except this time unlike the last one, the right side won.” I walked out of that gathering, as did one of you.

Another SBC leader used constant pressure against me in protest of our hiring of Dan Darling and Trillia Newbell, in 2013. At the time, this was, he said, because they did not have adequate Southern Baptist backgrounds. When I answered his concerns to his face, he said, “I was really just concerned about that black girl, whether she’s an egalitarian.” When I asked what possibly could lead him to think that a woman who has written complementarian articles for complementarian websites was an “egalitarian,” he responded: “A lot of those black girls are.” This same leader also let me have it when I said that white Christians should join our black Christian brothers and sisters in lamenting when young black men are shot, and that the moments of Ferguson and Eric Garner and the Emmanuel AME Church murders should motivate the church to address these questions with the gospel embodied in reconciled churches bearing one another’s burdens, that only those with guns would prevent black people from burning down all of our cities.

This is just a tiny sample of what I experience every single day. I am called a liberal—someone who believes in the inerrancy of Holy Scripture, in the authority of Holy Scripture, someone who has spent my life defending such concepts as the exclusivity of Christ for salvation. I am a “liberal” in this definition not because I deny the inerrancy of Scripture but because I affirm it. I believe in the inerrancy of all Scripture — including Luke 10 and Ephesians 2 and 3 and Romans 12, and all of it. I believe that no sin — including sins of sexual immorality or racial hatred — can be forgiven apart from the blood of Christ and repentance of such sins.

My concern about such issues is not because I believe in “social justice” (although, in the literal meaning of those words, of course I do, as the major and minor prophets tell us), but because I believe in the doctrine of hell. I believe in standing against racism not just because I love our African-American and Hispanic and Asian-American and immigrant brothers and sisters in Christ (although I certainly do), but also because I love bigots. And I believe that unrepentant sin, not brought to the light of Christ and

cleansed by the blood of Christ, through the gospel, leads to hell. I really believe in hell. That's why I've been clear for twenty-five years on abortion, on sexual chastity and morality, and on racism.

Southern Baptist Convention headquarters in Nashville, Tenn., on Feb. 18, 2019. RNS photo by Bob Smietana

But here is the pattern. Find a way to “investigate” me in secret, so that Southern Baptists do not hear what goes on in those rooms. In some of these “investigations,” what I have been charged with is “not playing enough to the Bubbas and the rednecks; they pay the bills.” I don't think we have “bubbas and rednecks,” I find such slurs offensive and derogatory, personally as well as ethically. I have been charged with saying that we should combat the devil both in his deception of women in thinking abortion is a choice they should make as well as the accusation of the devil in telling such women, in grief after an abortion they have had in the past, that they should hide in shame, that Jesus would not forgive them. I was told, “Such women should be in shame.” When I explained what I believe about the gospel, that those united to Christ in repentance and faith, are received by the Father as just and righteous and that there is “Therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ,” I was told, “You are not the Evangelism Department of the Southern Baptist Convention.”

I thought we were *all* “The Evangelism Department of the Southern Baptist Convention.” That's what they taught me at Woolmarket Baptist Church.

But the strategy here is clear. One of these figures told me in the middle of the 2017 debacle: “We know we can’t take you down. All our wives and kids are with you. This is psychological warfare, to make you think twice before you do or say something.” That’s exactly what it is.

If we want to compare anecdotal reports, I can tell you that I have worked as hard as I possibly can over the past seven years, to talk people into staying in the Southern Baptist Convention. One journalist said to me, “How many times are you going to try to bail these people out?” (speaking, in this case, for our work to try to turn around the disastrous floor action on the ‘alt-right’ in 2017, followed by the sexual abuse crisis matters of 2018). Over the past seven years, we have worked to bring people into SBC involvement, both in giving and in participation, and in talking countless numbers from leaving, because of all of the buffoonery and bigotry and wickedness. I cannot tell you how many people say — faithful, God-fearing leaders — that they do not want to have “Baptist” in their name because they are ashamed. When asked why, they tell us — the same things we are having to deal with over and over again.

Through all of this, brothers and sisters, I have tried to smile and pretend that everything is alright, with me personally and with the denomination. That’s because, for one thing, I don’t want lost people to know about this stuff. I have been afraid that they will associate it with Jesus. I don’t want the countless people — including pastors and church planters and missionaries, young people, women, people of color, to grow weary and to leave.

Some people will say, after this or any number of the other similar moves, that “We do not want Dr. Moore to resign.” They are telling the truth. They do not want me to leave. They want me to live in psychological terror, so that I will not say what the Southern Baptist Convention has assigned me to say, much less to reveal what I know about what goes on behind the scenes. And they want me to do so while asking my constituencies to come in and to stay in the SBC, though as submissive and disengaged “numbers” under the rule of a toxic and abusive gerontocracy.

Everywhere I go — everywhere I go — I am surrounded by former Southern Baptists. Last year, after speaking to the Anglican Church in North America national meeting, I went back to my hotel room and shook with tears. That’s because, as in virtually every one of such meetings, I was greeted by person after person after person who, like me, grew up in Southern Baptist churches, went to all the youth camps, knows the difference between Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong, between an RA and an Acteen. I had more conversations about “Training Union” and “Centrifuge” there than I ever have at an SBC meeting. They were nostalgic and wanted to remember a denomination they loved. None of these people, before they left, called the Executive Committee and threatened to defund anything if they didn’t get their way. The thousands of young people I encounter on college campuses who are now non-denominational don’t do exit interviews with their associational Director of Missions (they don’t even know what that is). Instead, they just look at the rage and the bigotry and the cover-ups and the buffoonery and they shrug their shoulders and say, “I guess they don’t want people like me.”

In every one of those situations, I want to scream: “But that’s not who Southern Baptists are! The people in the churches, everywhere that I have seen, are kind and loving and mission-focused. They are not part of all of that that you see!” And, indeed I think I am right. The people who are left are those of us who



have learned to simply filter out this nonsense and focus on what we know to be the best of us. The rest of the world cannot see that. And there are not enough of us who have been taught to believe that being a Southern Baptist is a moral obligation.

A while back, I was jolted to read a quote that one commentator posted about the SBC, jolted because that very same quote had come to my own mind so many times. The quote was from Whittaker Chambers, in a letter to his children, about how he came to reject Communism and to flee from the awful Soviet ideology. He referenced a woman talking about her father, who also had left Stalinism, and explained why very simply. "One night — in Moscow — he heard screams. That's all. Simply one night he heard screams."

I have heard many screams. And I am now realizing that some of those screams were my own, and those of my family.

My children asked my wife the other day if their Dad had had a moral failing. They had heard from their friends that their Dad was under investigation, and, as anyone would, they wondered if this meant that I had a character flaw. Maria cannot live with that, and neither can I.

I wanted you to know, from me, what's behind all of this, really. You deserve to know. And I wanted you to know that we will not keep living under these circumstances. I will not comply with another secret task force meant to silence me about issues I believe are issues of obedience to Christ. I will not sign another "unity" statement meant to "call off the dogs" of scrutiny so that the beatings may begin again in private. If the Southern Baptist Convention wants to be part of a house of prayer for all peoples, then that's what I signed up for. If the Southern Baptist Convention wants to be one big retirement home for a furious royal family, then, that's not what I signed up for.

I can only say, in regard to this latest secret and arcane attempt at intimidation: "I consider it a small thing to be investigated by you, or by any human court. In fact, I do not even investigate myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who investigates me" (1 Cor. 4:3-4).

When God called me to himself in Jesus, and when he called me to serve him in ministry, he called me to stand for the truth, to point the way to the kingdom, to die to self, and to carry the cross. He did not call me to provide cover for racial bigotry and child molestation. I will not do that. I love the Southern Baptist Convention, and am a faithful son of the Southern Baptist Convention. I do not believe the people of the Southern Baptist Convention want me to do that, at least that's not how they have acted in their votes when they are assembled together in national convention. But a small group in the shadows do want me to do that. They want me to be afraid of them. They want you to be afraid of them.

I am not afraid of them.

As I shared with the officers, when these people started their guerilla attacks, I spent years in grief, feeling like an exile and like an orphan. I felt rejected by my own people and wondered why people would let this go on. A poem by Wendell Berry summed up much of what I was feeling:

“Though you have done nothing shameful,  
they will want you to be ashamed.  
They will want you to kneel and weep  
And say that you should have been like them.  
And once you say you are ashamed,  
Reading the page they hold out to you,  
then such light as you have made  
in your history will leave you.  
They will no longer need to pursue you.  
You will pursue them, begging forgiveness.  
“They will not forgive you.  
There is no power against them.  
It is only candor that is aloof from them,  
only an inward clarity, unashamed,  
that they cannot reach. Be ready.  
When their light had picked you out  
and their questions are asked, say to them:  
'I am not ashamed.' A sure horizon  
will come around you. The heron will begin  
his evening flight from the hilltop.”

I am not ashamed. The sort of psychological and institutional terrorism that my wife and children and team and I have endured is not because I am not Southern Baptist enough, but because I am too Southern Baptist. I really believe what they taught me to sing, “Jesus Loves the Little Children, All the Children of the World.”

And I still do.

I want to thank you for standing with us, for caring about us, for being a group of people that have never once wavered in your integrity or your Christlikeness. We could not ask to serve with people we admire and love more than every single one of you. I am sorry that you have to even see this toxic sludge, much less have to deal with it.

In every other instance, I have tried to do what I thought was right: to be quiet, to bear all of this, including the spiritually abusive private meetings that I cannot even bear to think about right now. I have not wanted to defend myself. I just counted on others to do so, and to know that Jesus would bring to light, as he promises, every hidden thing on that day. But I want you to know that I can't bear it any more. I think to be the subject to all of this that goes on in secret makes me, in some ways, complicit with what I believe to be evil.

There's nothing other to this letter than that, for you to hear from me what has happened, and to hear from me, knowing that you know it, that the current status of the Southern Baptist Convention must change.

Asking me to live through all of this is one thing. Asking me to be quiet about bigotry and molestation, for the sake of some title, is too much to ask. Thank you for never once asking me to do so.

**RELATED:** [Russell Moore leaves Southern Baptist leadership, but denomination's troubles remain](#)

The Jordan River on the baptistery wall was fake. It was a water color of a scene that, to be honest, looked more like south Mississippi than the Middle East. But the message behind it was real. The message behind it was that even as I went down into the waters of death, Jesus had been there before, and Jesus would lift me back up, to newness of life. What I am counting on is not my baptism but his. I am counting on the fact that I am joined to One who, when he came out of those waters, heard the voice of God: "You are my beloved Son, and with you I am well pleased."

As one whose life is hidden in him, my hope is that, however stormy the banks of Jordan, those words apply to me too.

And, you know what? That's enough for me. Southern Baptists taught me that.

I love you,

Russell Moore