

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Mr. Smith Goes to the Convention

MEGAN BASHAM

1

Female pastors, LGBTQ, and the future of the SBC

In May of 2022, Mike Law, pastor of Arlington Baptist Church in Virginia, sent an email to the executive committee of the Southern Baptist Convention. As the only full-time staff member of a church of about 100, he had never had any interaction with his national leadership before, so he began with a chipper greeting introducing himself and his congregation, followed by a straightforward question: *Is a church that has a woman serving as pastor deemed to be in friendly cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention?*



Home to some 47,000 churches and 13 million members, the SBC's status as the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S. is due in large part to its loose structure. Rather than a top-down hierarchy, it's more of a casual association of churches who agree on doctrine and pool their money to fund missions, seminaries, and various charitable endeavors. Its leaders have no power to tell churches what to teach, where or how to operate, or who to hire. The only authority they have is to manage the billion-plus in unrestricted funds they receive and set the terms for who gets to be a member.

Though its contributions may have been small, Arlington Baptist was nonetheless a contributor in good standing. And its pastor was inquiring whether, since Article VI of the denomination's statement of faith asserts that "the office of pastor is limited to men"

WWW.LIONANDLAMBAPOLOGETICS.ORG

© 2023, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—1305 CHESTER ST—CLEBURNE, TX 76033

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

based on 1 Timothy 2:9-14 and 3:1-7, a church could remain in the club if it violated this doctrine.

Law explained that his understanding was that a church with a woman pastor would not qualify for what the SBC calls “friendly cooperation” because that requires a “faith and practice that closely identifies with the Baptist Faith and Message” (the SBC’s name for their statement of faith). Churches that affirm homosexual behavior and marriage had been disfellowshipped for falling afoul of the BF&M in the past. Why would this point of doctrine be any different?

He finished by thanking the committee for its service and said he looked forward to their answer.

He would never get one.

Speaking Through Other Means

The response Law received from VP of Communications, Jonathan Howe, explained that determinations of friendly cooperation are made by the credentials committee, not the executive committee. So if he wanted to report a church for having a woman pastor, that was where he should turn.

Law wrote back, apologizing for not being clear the first time — he knew where churches could be reported but was only asking about the general principle. Did the committee agree with the BF&M’s position on women in the pastorate and did that belief guide their decisions?



Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Howe replied that he could not speak for the credentials committee and did not think the credentials committee was likely to speak for the credentials committee either. “They speak through their actions throughout the year,” he said.

He then pointed Law to a portal where he could report a church for review.

To Law, the confusion lay in the fact that the committee had *not* been speaking through their actions. “In just a five-mile radius of Arlington Baptist, I had noticed five other SBC churches that had female pastors on staff,” he tells me. Further far-from-exhaustive research turned up 170 more. Colleagues shared that when they had reported churches in their areas for the same issue, the credentials committee took no action. Then there were the whispers that various SBC leaders themselves attended churches where women act as pastors (in fact, one [blog](#) cited Howe’s wife as one of them).

In short, it seemed to Law it would be helpful if the committee could be prevailed upon to speak through other means. Namely, words.

But while Law’s next email to senior members of the credentials committee produced no better results, their response *did* clarify why his query was being met with stonewalling and unasked-for directions on how to report churches.

“I believe your question is in reference to Saddleback Church,” the registration secretary informed him. Because of this, he said the committee would be “unable to give a response.”

With 23,000 members spread across 14 campuses, not to mention [extension groups](#) around the world that “attend” services online, Saddleback could hardly provide a greater contrast to Arlington Baptist, where Law himself stuffs sermon outlines into Sunday bulletins and makes the spaghetti for Wednesday night bible study.

The megachurch’s founding pastor, Rick Warren, is the author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, one of the best-selling books of the last few decades. Known for rubbing shoulders with [heads of state](#) at the United Nations and World Economic Forum and for counting top bureaucrats like former NIH director, [Francis Collins](#), among his personal friends, Warren has made it plain he considers himself more of an asset to his denomination than his denomination is to him. “We don’t need the Southern Baptist Convention,” he recently told *Christianity Today’s* editor-in-chief, Russell Moore, during a [podcast](#) interview. “They need the 6000 Purpose-Driven churches that are in our fellowship.”

In 2021, Warren had defied the BF&M by ordaining three women, leading to something of a crisis for SBC leadership. Media outlets like [The Washington Post](#) were covering Warren’s rebellion with subtle notes of glee, but much of the denomination’s membership

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

was deeply upset. Would the SBC eject their celebrity son, the pastor who, according to [his own website](#), is “America’s most influential spiritual leader”? Or would they overlook the tenets of their own statement of faith?

All of this conjecture was immaterial to Law, however, as he hadn’t been thinking of Saddleback at all. His experience with the churches in his immediate vicinity had simply convinced him that indifference to doctrinal adherence was leading to drift and confusion. He felt a bright line of clarity was in order.

Thus, a month after his initial letter to the executive committee, he determined to attend the SBC’s national meeting and propose a constitutional amendment. It would require Southern Baptist churches to conform to the BF&M on the question of women in the pastorate, just as they were required to do on issues of sexuality.

Delegates (known as messengers) to the annual convention would have the opportunity to consider the question solely on biblical merit, free from any wrangling over famous personalities or their [media–boosted](#) power plays.

But then, less than two weeks before the convention, Warren announced he was retiring and named as his replacement a husband-and-wife team. Though Law would not know it for some time, Warren’s decision would become the main obstacle to his hope of giving the SBC the chance to make a clear-cut, up-or-down choice.

Long Lines and New Committees, and Surprise Speakers

The first day of the convention started at 8 am. Law arrived at 7:45, stationing himself near one of ten microphones interspersed throughout a hall that would soon be churning with more than 12,000 attendees. Though he had pre-submitted his amendment by email the night before, there was no guarantee he would actually be granted an opportunity to make a motion as the process is, by all accounts, harrowing.

“There’s only two twenty-minute periods when you can make motions and long lines form for the mics, so they’re hard to get a hold of,” explains Sam Webb, an attorney from Houston who attended the convention as a messenger. “Even once you submit a request to a page and the page submits it to the platform, the platform may or may not call on you. If they do call on you, you only get a couple of minutes to speak. You have lights on you and the echoes within the hall can be incredibly loud, so it’s hard to see and hear.”

Given how easy it would be to miss his chance, Law resolved to continue standing near the mic for the two-and-a-half-hour wait even after Howe came by and pressed him to sit down. His persistence paid off — he wasn’t the first to make a motion as he’d hoped, but

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

he did get his proposal in early and it was quickly seconded. At that point, the committee on the order of business could have scheduled his amendment for an immediate vote. Instead, they sent it to the executive committee, who would then decide whether to bring it forward at the next convention, in the summer of 2023.

At that moment, Law had a choice to make. He could have pulled the amendment out of the committee to force a vote on the floor (and, in fact, that morning friends had nudged him to do so). But senior leaders in the SBC persuaded him to be patient and trust the executive committee to shepherd it through a formal vetting process, something that would also give him more time to drum up support before the 2023 convention.

It was a decision he would later come to regret.



That didn't mean the issue of women in the pastorate was tabled for 2022, however. At the 2021 convention, a pastor from Louisiana had submitted a motion calling for Saddleback to be disfellowshipped over its ordination of the three women. As with Law's motion, the credentials committee had decided not to act immediately but rather take a year to consider the matter. They were now due to deliver a decision.

Instead, the committee chairwoman announced they were recommending the creation of a new committee that would spend another year studying the definition of the word "pastor." After this proposal was met with howls of outrage, one of the six seminary presidents (himself the former chair of an SBC committee), stepped up to a mic to propose another option.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

He felt that perhaps the problem was not with the word “pastor” but “cooperation,” and suggested the new committee could instead spend a year studying what it meant to cooperate with the statement of faith. The messengers did not think that word required a year of study either, however, and overwhelmingly rejected this proposal as well.

Then it was time for lunch.

When the meeting reconvened, then-president Ed Litton was announcing standard business from the platform when he was summoned to a hushed exchange with the credentials committee chairwoman. Upon returning to the podium he announced there would be a departure from the agenda to hear from a surprise guest. “We’re gonna take a moment to extend a courtesy to a pastor here from Southern California,” he declared to the darkened hall. “Rick Warren—we want to hear his heart for this convention.”

As [The New York Times](#) has highlighted, Saddleback has never “[used] the word Baptist in its name or [foregrounded] any connection to the denomination.” Indeed, at a 2005 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Warren conspicuously [distanced](#) his church from the denomination. When an NBC reporter asked if it was part of the SBC, he replied, “No — it was. In the early years, when we first got started, it was a part of the Southern Baptist Convention...basically we cooperated with them in their missions program, but now we’re doing our own missions program.”

Months later, Warren asked Pew to alter its online transcript, saying he misspoke. But [The Baptist Standard](#) observed that he has always downplayed any affiliation with the SBC because of “what Warren calls ‘widespread misperceptions about Southern Baptists.’” And sources who have been in SBC leadership for decades tell me that before 2022, they can only recall Warren attending the convention a couple of times in 35 years. Those occasions coincided with his being offered prime speaking roles.

Nonetheless, Litton gave Warren a VIP welcome, permitting him to make a speech that ran over six minutes — more than double the three-minute time limit imposed on everyone else speaking from the floor. In it, Warren cited a litany of statistical proof for his church’s success. He noted that he “grew [Saddleback] to become the largest church in this convention” and that “78,157 members of our church signed our membership covenant after taking our membership class.” He even contrasted the impact of his life’s work with that of SBC institutions, saying, “I’ve had the privilege for 43 years of training 1.1 million pastors. That, sorry friends, is more than all the seminaries put together.”

When he was done, Litton thanked him and said he believed Warren could “feel the warmth, love, and appreciation of Southern Baptists.”

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Law tells me that in the many SBC conventions he's attended over the years, he has never seen anything like the special privilege Warren was afforded.

"That never happens. The parliamentarian might let somebody step up on the platform to offer a word or two on a point of a procedure, but to clear the microphones and say, 'We have a guest at microphone three,' is unheard of as far as I know."

He adds that as the question of Saddleback's membership was not being debated, there was no mechanism in *Robert's Rules of Order* (the classic parliamentary manual that governs SBC proceedings) for the platform to recognize Warren. "At no point in time at that meeting was Saddleback under the threat of being disfellowshipped. Nor was that motion offered. So procedurally it was completely and utterly out of the blue."

Webb was shocked by the decision on other grounds: "Here were SBC leaders pressuring people like Mike Law to sit down, telling him he can't stand near a microphone until the agenda gets to motions, but all of a sudden Rick Warren is handed the mic to essentially give a grandstanding, defensive speech over an issue that wasn't even being addressed by the platform? It was surreal."

Additionally, Webb notes that the platform cut off other speakers mid-sentence because their time ran out or their comments were ruled out of order on technicalities: "So it was one of these really strange moments where you think to yourself, why is it that Rick Warren gets this partiality, this favor with seemingly no time limit? It was really quite discouraging."

After Warren's speech, the credentials chairwoman announced that the committee had "heard the messengers" and were withdrawing their recommendation to study *any* words for a year. But since they'd already confirmed that Saddleback would not be disfellowshipped then, they still had another year to consider the matter before they had to make a report to the denomination again.

Still, the seed of questioning definitions was planted. And the intramural debate that followed the convention, in which the meaning of particular words and phrases were minutely dissected to determine if the authors could have intended something other than their obvious meaning, would sound familiar to any Constitutional attorney. Those who wanted to open pulpits to females argued that "pastor" might have referred only to "senior pastor" or "teaching pastor." Those who didn't argued the plain-text, originalist position.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Luckily, unlike James Madison or Thomas Jefferson, the authors responsible for Article VI of the Southern Baptist statement of faith were still alive and able to tell their denomination exactly what they meant.

Drs. Albert Mohler, Chuck Kelley, and Richard Land released a [statement](#) clarifying that when they wrote “pastor” 22 years earlier to address the [handful](#) of SBC women who had begun to claim that title, they’d meant simply “pastor.” Any pastor.

“This convention’s membership is defined by limiting the role of pastor to men,” Mohler, who serves as president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, tells me. “You’ll notice [the BF&M] does not put ‘senior’ or any other modifier in front of the word. So it’s not the convention that is unclear in this case.” In fact, he says he and his co-authors chose it because “of all the words Baptists use related to the teaching office, pastor was the most difficult to *misunderstand*.”

And yet, suddenly, two decades later, a lot of people were misunderstanding it. Or at least pretending to.

As for why so many Southern Baptists were experiencing this newfound confusion, Mohler believes it has less to do with definitions and more to do with cultural pressures, which he notes have been pushing in an egalitarian direction for decades.



Like Law, he sees ordaining women as the first step down the road of liberalism that also leads to affirming LGBTQ identities and behaviors — a trajectory many mainline denominations have taken.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

“If you look at the churches that have confused the question of men and women in the church and home, they tend to be overwhelmingly the same denominations that have followed the route of compromise on the larger sexuality and gender identity questions,” Mohler argues. “Frankly, this is all part of a package in terms of the theological confusion of the day. And if the SBC is faced with a church that directly and aggressively challenges our position on [women pastors] and the SBC does not take action, then that weakens our ability to take action on these other matters.”

9

Slippery Slope

In his podcast interview with Russell Moore, Warren insisted that concerns of leftward drift in the SBC generally and Saddleback specifically are unfounded. “This is not a battle between liberals and conservatives,” he said. “All the liberals left a long time ago.”

Yet there is significant evidence that his church is already sliding toward liberalism when it comes to homosexuality and gender identity.

In early 2020, Saddleback pastor Chris Clark and his wife, Elisa, co-founded a [Saddleback chapter](#) of [Embracing the Journey](#), a ministry for parents of LGBTQ children, with long-time Saddleback members, Doug and Shauna Habel. By the end of 2021, an ETJ [newsletter](#) revealed that Saddleback was hosting four ongoing ETJ support groups and one small group.

While ETJ does not specify whether it affirms LGBTQ lifestyles and identities, its founder, Greg McDonald, sits on the [board of Renovus](#), another faith-based non-profit that *does* assert that homosexuality and transgenderism are compatible with Christianity. The two organizations are closely linked.

Billing itself as a religious nonprofit that exists to “[reclaim] faith for LGBTQ+ Christians,” Renovus says its vision is “a world where no one has to choose between their faith and sexual orientation or gender identity.” While McDonald does not offer his views on homosexuality or transgenderism in his ETJ bio, in his Renovus bio, he shares, “It simply breaks my heart when people are told they can’t be a Christian and LGBTQ.”

Along with recommending ETJ, Renovus endorses groups like [The Reformation Project](#), [GayChurch.org](#) and [Q Christian Fellowship](#). All are dedicated, in the words of The Reformation Project, to “advancing LGBTQ Inclusion in the Church,” and all claim that “church teachings that condemn same-sex relationships and transgender people cause serious harm in the lives of LGBTQ Christians.” One more commonality: all three activist groups endorse ETJ.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

And the connections continue.

On its [events](#) page, Renovus lists an upcoming ETJ conference in Atlanta. The [lineup](#) of speakers includes Saddleback Pastor Chris Clark, Renovus board member Debbie Causey, as well as a number of authors like [Matthew Vines](#), [David Gushee](#), and [Justin Lee](#), who are well known for rejecting biblical orthodoxy on homosexuality and transgenderism in favor of full LGBTQ inclusion in the church.

10

But even if ETJ were not so deeply intertwined with openly affirming organizations and influencers, its recommendations and activities should still call Saddleback's discernment in deciding to partner with the organization into serious question.

Nowhere in its online materials does ETJ characterize LGBTQ identities or behaviors as sinful. Indeed, the vast majority of its recommended resources are explicitly affirming (again, from Gushee, Vines, and Lee, as well as [John Pavolitz](#), [Brian McLaren](#), [Colby Martin](#), and more).

To return again to those who launched ETJ at Saddleback — a close examination of Shauna Habel and Chris Clark's activism suggests that fears about the connection between churches who shift stances on ordaining women and those who shift on LGBTQ issues are well-founded.

In a Facebook fundraising [video](#) for the [documentary](#) *1946*, which argues that the traditional Christian condemnation of homosexuality traces back to a modern translation error, Habel (who sometimes goes by Habel-Morgan) explains how she came to share this belief.

Describing her attendance at a 2016 Reformation Project conference with her daughter, Habel says, "I saw gay Christians worshipping God. I saw the Holy Spirit. And I knew that God was in that place."

Habel has been [clear](#) on Twitter that part of her mission is persuading churches to abandon biblical orthodoxy with respect to sexuality and gender. In response to transgendering actress Ellen Page's criticism of non-affirming churches she posted, "Churches like Hillsong that mandate queer celibacy should try a year of solitary themselves...God's end game is love."

When a journalist posted a story about the gay marriage of Department of Transportation head Pete Buttigieg, Habel replied that she "works with conservative parents to help them become affirming." And she replied to author Beth Moore's explanation for why she removed a passage condemning homosexuality from an older book, "I believe the sin

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

the Bible spoke about in regard to homoerotic behavior was the abusive rape or lust of others and not love.”

Habel is also at work on her own affirming materials, assisting LGBTQ activist [Kathy Baldock](#) on a forthcoming book titled, *How The Bible Became Anti-Gay: Forging a Sacred Weapon*.

Chris Clark has little online presence either as a Saddleback pastor or as an activist with ETJ, but he, Habel, and McDonald were all speakers at The Reformation Project’s [2020 conference](#), “Reconcile and Reform.” Again, The Reformation Project was founded by gay activist Matthew Vines to “equip and empower Christians to advocate for LGBTQ inclusion in their faith communities.”

It’s worth emphasizing that according to ETJ’s newsletter, the Clarks and Habels introduced ETJ to Saddleback two-and-a-half years before Warren retired in September 2022. It’s also clear the church is well aware of its activities as the ministry is [listed](#) on Saddleback’s website under “care and support” events.

Though Clark’s LinkedIn page no longer appears to be available, it previously revealed that he has been affiliated with Saddleback in some professional capacity since 1989. It also showed that he has been a Saddleback care pastor at the Lake Forest campus for four-and-a-half years.

His ETJ bio provides the further detail that he leads Saddleback’s counseling training—a role that would presumably include teaching lay counselors how to respond to congregants dealing with homosexuality or transgenderism. Further, both The Reformation Project and ETJ cite Clark as a “Saddleback pastor” in his speaker bios, suggesting the church endorses his activities in this arena.

Finally, the couple Warren selected to lead Saddleback don’t seem entirely clear on the Bible’s stance on homosexuality either. When asked whether a gay “married” couple should carry on with their sinful relationship after coming to Christ, Andy and Stacie Wood [answered](#), “I don’t know. That’s really hard.”

They went on to say “there is no black-and-white answer” and they’d have to ask the couple how they “feel the Holy Spirit is leading them.” The Woods did not cite any Scripture in their response.

I reached out to Saddleback about their decision to partner with ETJ and about the involvement of one of their pastors and two of their ministry leaders with The Reformation Project and did not receive a reply.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Saddleback could simply agree to part amicably with the SBC given that it no longer agrees with the denomination's doctrine. It would not lose any of its own properties or staff or membership by doing so—as one pastor [joked](#), most of the church's members probably just found out they were Southern Baptist due to all the controversy and media coverage.

But Grant Castleberry, a Raleigh pastor who supports Law's amendment, points out that is not the pattern we historically see from those who want to move in a liberal direction.

"If you study how denominations went liberal throughout the 20th century, [they] never left the denominations. Because there are institutions at stake. There's seminaries at stake, colleges at stake. There's buildings at stake. And so the strategy that liberals employed throughout was never to leave, it was to take control."

Common Procedure

As the summer of 2022 faded into fall, Mike Law began to make the case for his constitutional amendment to the wider SBC.

In August, he drafted a public [letter](#) and began soliciting signatures from SBC pastors to demonstrate to the executive committee that an up-or-down vote was necessary to "bring clarity to the current confusion." The letter also stressed that allowing the situation to continue encouraged churches to distrust the Scriptures that had led the convention to affirm Article VI in the first place.

"Devaluing our doctrine will not lead to faithfulness or fruitfulness," Law wrote. "Rather, if we learn anything from [the] history [of liberal mainline denominations], embracing empty doctrines will soon empty our Convention too."

Many pastors seemed to agree, and his petition rapidly gained more than 2000 signatures. But dozens of pastors replied that they could not sign because their churches, the majority of which had been Southern Baptist since their founding, had already broken with the SBC over perceived leftward drift.

"A decade ago I was in ministry in the United Methodist Church," wrote one from Melbourne, Florida. "The writing was on the wall and the Lord graciously called us out of that. The same writing is on the wall now for the SBC...The fact that the committee wanted to take a year to figure out 'what a pastor is' was beyond laughable."

A pastor from Burden, Kansas, shared that his congregation had voted to leave when the convention failed to address women in the pastorate in 2022 when given a clear opportunity.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Several explained that even more than drift, a lack of responsiveness from national leadership led to their decision to depart. "I personally was in the SBC for 54 years," wrote one pastor from Millington, Tennessee. "We tried for months to get clarification on many issues. We wrote letters, called, but no answers." Another told Law, "My church would join you in a second if I thought the executive committee would listen to you."



Law pushed forward, hoping the committee would prove such pessimism wrong. And for a while, it looked like they might.

In October, the trustees for Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the largest and most influential of the six SBC schools, [made it clear](#) they wanted to see the pastoral requirement of "biblically qualified men" remain.

Almost immediately after, new SBC President Bart Barber and executive committee chairman Jared Wellman issued a joint [statement](#) about the amendment, saying, "As far as it lies within our authority to do so, we are committed to letting these questions come before the messengers at our 2023 Annual Meeting....we plan to protect the messengers' rights to discuss and decide these questions."

Taking this as a good sign, Law began reaching out individually to members of the executive committee, offering to respond to any questions or concerns they might have. In November, he met with Jonathan Howe and other Executive Committee staff over Zoom, who told him they would decide at their February meeting whether to allow his amendment a floor vote.

But before February arrived Law began to hear from various national leaders, suggesting perhaps his amendment itself could be amended. Perhaps it could just address "senior" pastors instead of "pastors," despite the fact that Article VI's authors made it explicitly clear that was not their intent.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

"I could just tell they were kind of casting about for a different option," Law tells me. "And I was clear I didn't want that because the whole point was to bring clarity and long-term stability to the convention."

After his refusal to cede to a lesser option, the reception Law received from the committee seemed to turn icy. Their staff informed him he would not be able to submit the list of thousands of SBC pastors who had signed his open letter supporting the amendment. They would also not consider the partial list of SBC churches with female pastors he had created as evidence of the need to act.

Then came the biggest blow of all. On February 7, two weeks before the executive committee meeting where they were supposed to decide whether to bring his amendment up for a vote, Wellman told Law they were pushing the decision off. The committee would wait until their final meeting in June, right before the convention. The news did not bode well and Law could not understand what had caused the change of heart.

Crushed, he emailed the subcommittee chairman asking if he could come to Nashville for their February 21st meeting and give a 20-minute PowerPoint presentation on why the amendment was needed. The chairman said he could have five, with no PowerPoint, but he could have a brief Q&A.

Because he would have no access to media and his in-person talk would be so short, Law—the father of four young children, who had already invested much more time in this project than he'd ever anticipated—put together a [YouTube video](#) of his presentation. He then emailed the link to the executive committee members early on the morning of February 16, explaining in his first two sentences what it was and inviting them to watch it "on the chance" they had the time or interest. To keep the mood light, he joked, "If you watch it at double speed, it will go even faster."

At 11:48 am, the subcommittee chairman emailed back simply, "Thanks Mike, see you next week."

But at some point over the course of the day, the chairman evidently decided that Law, who had never been told he shouldn't or couldn't communicate with committee members, had offended by emailing the video. At 5:47 pm the chairman replied again, this time with a terse note. "You have essentially worked around what is common procedure for having motion makers share with [the executive committee]." Because of this, the chairman said he would no longer be allowed Q&A time, only the five minutes to present.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Then, on February 21, the same day Law gave his brief and uneventful presentation, the credentials committee made a move so unexpected, not only did [The New York Times](#), [People Magazine](#), and [NBC](#) (to name just a few) pick up the news, so did the British outlet, [The Guardian](#).

The executive committee announced it was disfellowshipping Saddleback.

Southern Baptists on both sides of the debate immediately [expressed confusion](#) over the timing. SBC leadership had drug their feet on the question of Warren's church for nearly two years. Why would they abruptly oust Saddleback so close to the convention? Why not let the issue lie until June when they could make a report to the messengers? Even more sensible, why not put Law's amendment up for a vote and let the convention decide the principle that should apply, not just to Saddleback, but to the hundreds of other churches that were flouting the statement of faith?

A [tweet](#) from executive committee member Mike Keahbone immediately following the announcement seemed to give the game away.

"Saddleback now has the option to appeal, which appears likely," Keahbone said. "That appeal would happen on the floor of the annual meeting in New Orleans and [be] decided by the messengers. This was the heart of the room; to let the messengers of the SBC decide."

Keahbone didn't explain how it could appear "likely" that Saddleback would do anything given that the decision had just been announced that day and Warren had not yet offered any public comment about how his church would respond. But it was clear that the statement Barber and Wellman had made about Law's amendment and "letting the messengers decide" was about to go through a spin cycle.

Backdoor Precedent

Two days after Keahbone's post, Barber [echoed](#) the sentiment in a long tweet thread that made it clear the decision to disfellowship Saddleback was not one of principle, made because the executive committee believed the church had violated biblical doctrine, but one of strategy.

"This is actually the most direct mechanism for the messengers to be able to vote on this question," Barber wrote, adding, "to suggest that [the committee] has usurped the messengers in taking this action...misconstrues the spirit of the EC members in making the decisions."

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

He pointed out that if the committee had not decided to oust Saddleback, another messenger could have made a motion to disfellowship it again, restarting the process, ad infinitum. Barber made no mention of the fact there was also an amendment on the table that could put an end to the process in a much clearer and more convictional way.

The executive committee kicked Saddleback out of the club, in other words, to force a vote on Saddleback. And *that* vote would be how the messengers would make their voices heard on the issue. The swap was evidenced by Barber's closing remark in the thread. "I promised earlier in the year that I would do all that I could to let the messengers express their will on this question," he said. "I remain committed to that."

So Barber's pledge to "let the messengers decide," which had been made in the context of Law's amendment, was being retrofitted to Warren's appeal. Law and his amendment were being written out of the script.

Sam Webb, however, was not inclined to erase the existence of the amendment. Though he had to [ask](#) Barber three times what his comments meant for Law, he did finally get an answer. During a [testy](#) exchange, Webb posted a link to a news story about the joint statement, saying, "The article below about *the amendment* says you are committed to letting 'these questions' come before the messengers." Barber replied that Webb referring to his initial promise in the context in which had been offered was the equivalent of demanding Law get "special treatment" and a "VIP pass."

But Barber's response was positively forthright compared to Wellman's, who denied in an email to Law that the joint statement had ever been referring to his amendment, despite the fact that the article about it from the SBC's own house organ, The Baptist Press, had been titled, "Barber, Wellman issue statement on proposed constitutional amendment."

Some rank-and-file onlookers seem to have [picked up](#) on the state of play and realize that whether women can be pastors in the SBC is likely going to be decided by a popularity contest over Rick Warren. Most Southern Baptists though, busy with their churches and communities, likely have no idea. Inside sources tell me many will assume the question of women pastors has been addressed and will not come to the convention to vote.

"[The executive committee] didn't have to schedule a vote on Saddleback. They *wanted* to boot out Rick Warren in a mid-year meeting that nobody knew was coming," one SBC insider who has worked closely with the committee tells me. "That way the conservatives see it and think, 'That's great. The issue is handled, we won't need to go to the convention.' Meanwhile, the outrage by the liberals has been maximized. And that's

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

who's gonna show up angry...It will be a question of, *do you want to keep Rick Warren?* Whatever happens with that vote will set a backdoor precedent."



Already, the celebrity canvassing on Warren's behalf has begun. New York Times columnist, and Presbyterian, David French [promoted](#) Warren's argument that the SBC's statement of faith (which Warren agreed with until 2020) represents "fundamentalism."

Popular historian and author Scot McKnight, an Anglican, promoted another petition that was just launched, [tweeting](#), "Please sign this letter, with me, to support women in ministry in the SBC." Never mind the fact no one in the SBC has been trying to stop women from serving in ministry, only from acting as pastors.

It's noteworthy that the group that launched the petition, Baptist Women in Ministry, was started by women who left the SBC in the 1980s and 90s over its refusal to ordain women. One of the founders, Molly Marshall, now serves as president of a seminary for the United Church of Christ, the first mainline denomination in the U.S. to endorse gay "marriage." And today the group features female Baptist ministers who [advocate](#) "reproductive justice" (ie., abortion access) and [describe](#) the "joy" they experience from "fully includ[ing] LGBT brothers and sisters."

It might have taken the feminist dissidents 30+ years, but they may at last be on the brink of getting their way in the SBC. And female pastors may be only their first win.

Nearly everyone has, at one time or another watched the Jimmy Stewart Classic, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. It's the quintessential American feel-good story of the little guy

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

who overcomes the machinery of power, wealth, and fame armed with nothing more than good intentions and devotion to a cause.

But that's just a movie. Law tells me he doesn't hold out much hope now that his amendment will be brought before the messengers. "I tried to follow the process," he says. "It turns out, the process stinks."

Come June, there will be a vote on Saddleback. The question is, will there be a vote on Scripture?



Megan Basham is a Claremont Lincoln Fellow whose writing has appeared in such outlets as *The Wall Street Journal*, *First Things*, and *National Review*. Her award-winning writing and journalism focuses on subjects like marriage and family, religious life, and the entertainment industry.

© *American Reformer*, April 11, 2023. Retrieved May 26, 2023.

<https://americanreformer.org/2023/04/mr-smith-goes-to-the-convention/>