

Evangelical leaders stand by pastor accused of abuse cover-up

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(RNS) Several leading evangelical pastors and authors have come to the defense of a pastor accused in a lawsuit for covering up sexual abuse of children.

C. J. Mahaney was named as a defendant in a lawsuit, which charged that he and other leaders of Sovereign Grace Ministries permitted the abuse of children to occur in churches that formed part of the group. Sovereign Grace, an association of 80 Reformed evangelical churches, is based in Louisville, Ky.

Maryland Judge Sharon V. Burrell dismissed the lawsuit ruling that nine of 11 plaintiffs waited too long to sue under the statute of limitations. Their attorney plans to appeal the judge's decision.

After the dismissal, leading evangelicals are stepping up to defend Mahaney.

"We have stood beside our friend, C. J. Mahaney, and we can speak to his personal integrity," wrote Al Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Ligon Duncan, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Miss.; and Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

The trio, who said they did not want to comment on the case while it was still in court, posted the letter on the Together for the Gospel Facebook page. Together for the Gospel is a biennial Christian conference the three founded with Mahaney.

Early Friday (May 24) morning, a string of negative comments had been posted on the Facebook wall, and the post was moved to the Together for the Gospel website.

But not everyone is rushing to Mahaney's defense. Boz Tchividjian, a law professor and executive director of Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (GRACE), which has investigated sex abuse allegations, found omissions in the pastors' statement.

"Why no mention that CJ Mahaney was actually the Senior Pastor at one of these churches where all of this horrific abuse allegedly occurred AND that [he] discouraged these families from bringing this matter to the God ordained civil authorities?" he wrote on the Facebook wall.

"Omitting such a fundamentally important fact from this statement is a fundamental error."

Tchividjian is the grandson of evangelist Billy Graham and the brother of Tullian Tchividjian, pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and another leader of the Reformed evangelical movement

"This lawsuit is less about the abuse and more about an institution that took steps to protect itself and its reputation over the victimized souls (and bodies) of little ones," Boz Tchividjian wrote.

Mahaney also got support from three prominent Reformed evangelical authors, Justin Taylor, Kevin DeYoung and D.A. Carson, who blasted media portrayals of Mahaney as the "face" of the lawsuit against the Sovereign Grace network.

Mahaney took a leave of absence in 2011 after other pastors in the Sovereign Grace network charged him with "expressions of pride, unentreatability, deceit, sinful judgment and hypocrisy." Six months later, the group reinstated Mahaney, declaring full confidence in him.

Last October, the same month that the lawsuit was filed, Mahaney told the Sovereign Grace board that he would step down to focus on pastoral ministry. Two months later, the flagship church Mahaney started in Gaithersburg, Md., Covenant Life Church, voted to leave the Sovereign Grace network.

Joshua Harris, the current pastor of Covenant Life, referenced the lawsuit in his sermon on Sunday (May 26), and acknowledged that he had been sexually abused as a child.

He said that some church members told him they planned to leave the church over the allegations. Urging them to stay, he said, "Please don't allow the circumstance to draw you away from faith in Jesus."