



Statement Regarding U.S. Supreme Court Certiorari Denial

February 23, 2026

The Supreme Court's decision not to review the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals decision brings closure to a long and difficult legal dispute filed against our ministry nearly nine years ago. The outcome in this matter — the [opinion](#) of the Fifth Circuit — now stands as a landmark protection of religious liberty for all Southern Baptists and other people of faith.

The Fifth Circuit recognized and respected doctrinal autonomy and voluntary cooperation among Baptist churches and ministries, while also carefully applying longstanding First Amendment principles that protect religious organizations from having internal ministry matters scrutinized by civil courts. We are grateful.

Some in our SBC family have expressed concern about how the courts applied religious liberty protections to Baptists, going so far as to suggest that the courts misunderstood Baptist polity. However, such characterizations do not align with the Fifth Circuit's own words.

As NAMB consistently represented in its filings, the Fifth Circuit stated in its opinion:

“Baptist ecclesiology is non-hierarchical, and each Baptist church is autonomous. Nevertheless, Baptist churches have long voluntarily cooperated in fellowship with one another and pooled resources for missions, evangelism, and church planting.”

The outcome both respects Baptist distinctives and reaffirms that Baptists and other non-hierarchical faith groups are no less entitled to the First Amendment's protections against secular intrusion into ministry affairs. In the words of the opinion, the Fifth Circuit “decline[d] to be the first court ever to hold the church autonomy doctrine protects only hierarchically organized religious entities.” Doing so, the court stated, would amount to “denominational discrimination, not denominational neutrality.”

While NAMB has consistently disputed any claims of wrongdoing in this matter, the Fifth Circuit's ruling reflects a more important principle: civil courts may not decide disputes when doing so would require them to evaluate faith-based judgments, religious doctrine, or internal religious governance. We respect the right of others to express differing views, but civil courts are not the proper forum for resolving disagreements like this among churches, ministries, or ministry leaders. The Constitution rightly protects against such government entanglement.

At NAMB, we remain committed to serving churches and pastors, supporting missions, and working cooperatively with our ministry partners for the sake of the gospel. We hope this decision allows all involved to move forward in a spirit of peace and with continued focus on the mission God has given us.

FAQ — Supreme Court Certiorari Denial

February 23, 2026

1. What happened at the Supreme Court?

The U.S. Supreme Court declined to review a lower court's ruling in NAMB's favor in a years-long legal dispute filed against our ministry. The Supreme Court's "certiorari denial," as it is called, brings the litigation to a close and leaves the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruling in effect. A certiorari denial does not express agreement or disagreement with the lower court's reasoning; it simply means the Supreme Court chose not to take the case.

2. What did the Fifth Circuit decide?

The Fifth Circuit held that the First Amendment's church autonomy doctrine barred the claims in this case because resolving them would require civil courts to intrude into matters of faith, doctrine, and internal religious decision-making.

Importantly, the court recognized:

- the **autonomy** and **non-hierarchical structure** of Baptist churches and ministries
- the **voluntary cooperation** among Baptists in pursuit of shared mission

The Fifth Circuit's full opinion is [publicly available](#) for those who wish to read it.

3. Does this mean Baptist organizations are "immune" from lawsuits?

No. The court explicitly stated that religious organizations are not immune from secular laws.

While NAMB has consistently disputed any claims of wrongdoing in this matter, the Fifth Circuit's ruling reflects a more important principle: civil courts may not decide disputes like this when doing so would require them to evaluate faith-based judgments, religious doctrine, or internal religious governance.

4. Why did some Baptists disagree with the ruling?

Some in our SBC family have expressed concern about how the courts applied religious liberty protections to Baptists, going so far as to suggest that the courts misunderstood Baptist polity. However, such characterizations do not align with the Fifth Circuit's own words:

"Baptist ecclesiology is non-hierarchical, and each Baptist church is autonomous. Nevertheless, Baptist churches have long voluntarily cooperated in fellowship with one another and pooled resources for missions, evangelism, and church planting."

We respect the right of others to express differing views, but civil courts are not the proper forum for resolving disagreements like this among churches, ministries, or ministry leaders. The Constitution rightly protects against such government entanglement.

5. Does this ruling change how we work with churches or partners?

No. The ruling recognizes long-standing Baptist priorities:

- churches and ministries are autonomous
- cooperation is voluntary
- cooperative mission efforts are protected from civil court entanglement

Our relationships, agreements, and ministry partnerships continue as before.

6. Why is this outcome important for Baptist life?

The outcome reinforces that Baptists may:

- organize themselves as they choose
- cooperate (or not) according to conscience
- pursue mission without courts being asked to referee internal religious disagreements

Those principles have been central to Baptist identity for generations.

7. What is our focus now?

With the litigation concluded, our focus remains fully on:

- serving churches and pastors
- supporting missions and ministry work
- stewarding our shared calling faithfully and responsibly

8. Are there any next legal steps?

No. The Fifth Circuit's decision is now final.

9. Why are we exercising restraint in public commentary?

Because restraint:

- reflects our confidence in the outcome
- avoids prolonging division
- keeps attention where it belongs — on the mission rather than litigation

For reference:

The Fifth Circuit's opinion is publicly available here: [Fifth Circuit Opinion \(PDF\)](#)