

Rick,

Thanks for listening Sunday. We truly value your guidance, and leadership, and we are both extremely grateful for the genuine lovingkindness that you constantly extend to us personally, and to everyone in the Harvest family. I hope that I didn't come off as angry, because I wasn't, only very, very sad and disappointed. I'm not mad at anyone, but Deb and I have been concerned for a long time that as a body Harvest is trending in an unfortunate direction where large segments the church leadership are more and more distant from the body. This incident and the Elder Board's explicit or tacit approval of the incident seem to reaffirm our sad belief that some of our elders no longer regard themselves as part of our body, but instead aspire to occupy positions separate and above us.

It seems a strange coincidence, but one year ago today, I met with Dave Corning to discuss Deb's and my concerns regarding the potential perils to what we perceive as the increasing gulf between the congregation, and many of our elders. In an accompanying open letter to the Elder Board that I gave to Dave, we named as notable exceptions Dave and yourself, and predicted that a separation between the shepherds and the flock would one day result in loss of elder accountability and unforeseen, unfortunate consequences. I don't know if Dave shared the letter with you or your fellow elders, but if Dave consents, we'll furnish a copy for you.

We believe that James' choice to buy what can only be described as a luxury home in an extremely affluent and exclusive community, and announcing his move in terms that were so vague as to barely rise to the level of ambiguity, strongly suggests that he no longer respects and esteems those whom he shepherds as greatly as he once did.

Rick, James could have announced to the body that he purchased Senator Peter Fitzgerald's home in Inverness for \$1.9 million with as much candor as he afforded *Chicago Magazine*, but instead, he seemingly avoided accountability to the body by stating that he remained in the "Palatine area", and purchased a home that had "never been listed on the market"..."at a price 20% below its market value". Every one of these statements is true, but not the entire truth, and accordingly misleading and deceptive.

In his book *Shepherding the Church*, Dr. Stowell wrote to pastors and elders that "Deceit seeks to gain some advantage by masking part of the truth, twisting the details, or manipulating the communication to effect a less-than-true communication of the set of facts...through our false words we deny them [the flock] the privilege of perceiving and responding to life based on reality." and "We are beguiled we draw a wrong conclusion from a set of facts, and our tongues beguile others when we share those false conclusions...This propensity has devastating impact on a community of believers." This I'm sad to say isn't the only example; the expression "pennies on the dollar" also immediately comes to mind.

As I mentioned Sunday, John Piper writes that purchasing luxury homes or second homes is not by scriptural definition sinful, but instead sets a very poor biblical example of Christ-like stewardship of great financial blessing. Deb and I are in total agreement with Dr. Piper's assessment. We also hold that the argument "there are other pastors who own bigger and more expensive houses" can be likened to a boy who explained that he jumped off the roof because all the other boys were doing it. The boy's argument is based on the belief that wisdom is correctly determined by popular consensus. In the context of biblical interpretation James has taught that this is flawed logic. Are we then incorrect in concluding that the "other pastors" argument is invalid too?

In a biblical context, although buying the home was certainly lawful; we must consider if was it profitable and edifying to the body. Will this purchase build up Christ's kingdom on earth, or will it result in pain, dissention, and suspicion? And Rick, (the following is just Jeff's opinion) waiting to see how much blow-back is generated before we decide on a biblical course of action, is not, in my private estimation biblical, it's post-modern and "Clintonesque."

Added to the shock of the unexpected media revelation of James' new home, we believe it safe to surmise that many of our members also experienced inestimable damage to their personal witness, when they were confronted by unbelieving, family, neighbors, and co-workers who knew more of the facts than they. Doubtless, many of our brothers and sisters (both in and out of the Harvest family) found themselves totally unprepared to explain or justify a situation that especially to the unsaved appears suspicious at best.

In the now distant past James has taught that for believers, and especially pastors, the appearance of impropriety can be as damaging as actual impropriety. He's also formerly said that to set a personal example of good financial stewardship he'd never carry a mortgage larger than the one he had on his home in Arlington Heights. How does this new situation reflect James' past teachings.

I've attached .pdf files of a very brief chapter from John Piper's book, *Brothers We Are Not Professionals*, entitled "Brothers Tell Them Copper Will Do" and Dr. Stowell's discussion of lying, deceit, and beguilement from *Shepherding the Church*. It is our hope that more authoritative voices on this subject may persuade you and other members of the Elder Board to prayerfully consider a redress of this issue in a way that we hope will more greatly glorify our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Rick, let me conclude by raising one final idea. This episode is not just about the price of James' house or the zip code where it is located or elder transparency to our local body of believers; it is also about accountability for the use of influence.

In October, 1884, Charles Spurgeon was publicly embroiled in controversy over his defense of his "cigar habit". Spurgeon later admitted that although his reply to the critics of his habit was somewhat flippant, it was not, in fact, "unlawful" for him to smoke so he was free to enjoy his cigars "to the glory of God".

Mr. Spurgeon was called to account in an open letter/ tract published and distributed by a clergyman named W.M. Hutchings. While Mr. Hutchings held Charles Spurgeon in the absolute highest esteem as a phenomenally gifted preacher and minister of the Gospel, he reminded him of the heightened responsibilities that come with that privilege.*

"... and with the view to press upon you the solemn responsibility of every word you speak. Thousands of people believe what you say because you say it. True, they ought to be more like the Bereans of old, but they are not. You must know this. Your people at the Tabernacle know it. We, Christians of other churches, know it; and we bless God that grace has been given you to prove yourself worthy of this great trust, and to lead these weaker brethren into the way of truth. But suppose, in your teachings of doctrine or duty, you yourself should be misled into error upon any point—however trivial it may seem—what a misleading that would be! What a following you would have in the wrong path! What mischief—irreparable in time or eternity—might be wrought! Why, sir, angels might weep, and hell would hold carnival! Pardon the suggestion I make of such a possibility. You are not infallible, nor do you desire to be thought so.

... We follow that arch-Pharisee who said, "If meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth [I Cor. 8:13];" and "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything [is it possible that the word "anything" can include "a good cigar"?) whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak [Rom. 14:21]." We know tobacco is a stumbling-block, and an offence, and a cause of weakness to multitudes of our brethren—brethren in the Church of Christ—brethren in the bonds of a common humanity—and so we practice what "Pharisee" Paul teaches, and sacrifice personal indulgence, lest it should be a snare to others. We think we have also a Higher Authority and a Greater Example—even the authority and example of Him who "pleased not Himself [Rom. 15:3]."

... Clearly, the rule of life you laid down in your defense of smoking is this:—That a Christian man is at liberty to exercise self-indulgence in all matters against which there is no direct and express command in Scripture. I have not so learned Christ. I read the Master's command, "DENY THYSELF, take up thy cross, and follow me [Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Mark 10:21; Luke 9:23; Luke 14:27],"

Rick, Deb and I are heartsick over this issue. We have lost many nights of sleep through worry for Harvest, and in disappointment that our plans for growth seem to continue unabated while our foundations may be weakening. We love Harvest, and we love to watch God at work at Harvest, and we continue to serve, although at times our disappointment in what we see as growth at any cost makes leaving appear to be a merciful alternative. All this to say, perhaps nothing catastrophically bad will come out of this particular situation, but please ask the other elders, will anything good?

Please know it is our prayer that this letter will be read in the same spirit in which it is offered, and that however this message is received, we remain faithfully and lovingly your brother and sister in Christ, and look forward to the sharing of your and the other elders' thoughts on this matter.

Jeff & Debbie Richardson

Pro Agno et sanctis suis

January 31, 2006

*The entire tract can we read at <http://www.spurgeon.org/misc/cigars.htm>