

September 18, 2013

Today is the official twenty-fifth anniversary of Harvest Bible Chapel, a church that Betsy and I poured our lives into for twenty-two years, from the first informational meeting in May 1988. I served as the Elder Board Chairman for twenty-one years as well as on the boards of *Walk in the Word* and *HBF*.

As you may or may not know, we left Harvest nearly three years ago. Why would we leave our church home – where we raised our family, when we were not being forced out – unless we did not believe that it was absolutely necessary to do so? At the end of December 2010 we left of our own accord after many troubling years. We had twelve reasons for leaving that I will not disclose here, but I did share most of them in a meeting with James on December 20, 2010, our last day.

In the beginning of Harvest there was solid accountability for James and all the elders. The church seemed headed in the right direction. There were many good years. But over the years, James' perspectives changed and he began to treat the church as if it belonged to him. This only escalated when the church was given the 600 acres of land in Michigan by the Van Kampens and the Elgin property by the Greens. He assumed Harvest was his and his to control. Harvest became more and more about him and his insatiable drive to expand his influence. The result has been abuse of power, lack of accountability and major financial gain to him.

James has a big issue with submitting to authority. He once said to me, "I have no problem with authority unless I think it's stupid". He has a major issue of entitlement. He cannot reveal his salary because it is indefensible. No one could even determine his total combined income from all of the Harvest ministries without seeing his tax returns. He hides his full income because it is beyond explanation to those who are sacrificially paying for it. That is why he cannot even give his elders more than a pie chart for the budget of the church.

Nearly two years before leaving Harvest, in February 2009, I met with James and told him that I had lost confidence in him and his leadership and that I didn't want to work with him anymore. Immediately after, he began a concerted effort to weaken the elder board. He used degrading statements such as "You guys are useless; I do my best to make you feel like elders". Solid leaders left the board.

It was at this point of the church history that James assigned a "research committee" outside of the elder board's authority and knowledge, to significantly restructure the governance of the church. The intended result was to remove the elders from having authority over the direction of the church – giving him more authority than any one man should have. In essence, he already had it. He had a way of working around the elders to accomplish his objectives and announce them as "approved by the elders". How James imploded the Harvest elder board in 2009 is remarkably similar to how Mark Driscoll imploded his a year earlier.

On August 23, 2009, there was an Elder meeting to which James invited, unannounced and against protocol, several pastoral staff to attend. His goal was to restructure the Board according to the results of the “research” which he himself had directed. He wanted “proof” that he needed more control and greater affirmation. Only two elders dissented – myself, and Bill Ciofani. However, the writing was on the wall. I knew immediately that my time was up. I could not serve under such a system where the Senior Pastor has ultimate control with no true checks and balances. This includes control of the money, the staff, and the entire direction of the church.

It was an extremely difficult decision to leave Harvest altogether but over the next several months it became impossible in good conscience to remain. To do so would leave people with the false belief that James was accountable or that we supported the direction he was taking Harvest.

I rotated off the board in November 2009. It was clear to me and I said so, that the church would have to change its Constitution in order to enact James’ new structure. This can only be done with the full understanding and agreement of the congregation. The current Constitution must be shown to the congregation with the proposed changes in red letters. As far as I know that has never occurred, which would mean the church structure has been operating against the Constitution of the church since 2009. When Scott Phelps, an elder, asked to see a copy of the Constitution he was told there wasn’t one by Steve Huston. I carried one to every board meeting I ever attended.

One of the biggest reasons and the final straw for our leaving was James’ harsh and vindictive treatment of people. He assumed power to fire and hire anyone he chose. Several good people were forced out as James and the XLT, under his submission, decided they were “going in a new direction”. The elder board operates in submission to the XLT even if they don’t realize it. They do not have any real authority to do anything except carry out James’ wishes.

Over the past nearly three years, the full force of James’ wrath has been manifested against me, and Betsy in nearly every possible way (though often cleverly disguised as the decision or action of another and usually executed through a long-time friend or acquaintance who must betray us to prove allegiance to James). He has worked behind the scenes to destroy our reputations, our ministries, even our livelihoods. One of the most perverse and shocking (though lightly veiled) accusations came in a public sermon by James on June 5, 2011, which also aired on *Walk in the Word* a year later. The Saturday night message was harsher; the Sunday message was edited. We were portrayed as “blaspheming the church and taking advantage”. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Our goal was to leave quietly and not cause any division. We fully, but wrongly believed that our friendships and even ministry relationships would continue. People even wrote to us saying as much, until James decided otherwise. There was no issue of sin being called out in us. To the contrary, Rick Donald wrote me

and said, he would “never allow anyone to say anything bad about me”. There was no difficulty between us, or any person, except James. That of course, would change rapidly as James mounted charges against us.

In that last meeting, James and I agreed that our differences would remain between us. However, Betsy and I would soon discover that he had set upon a deliberate course to discredit us. What was between James and I, and was to remain as such, became a series of ever-expanding concentric circles of James’ influence of others against us – pastors, staff, flock leaders, friends, even Fellowship churches and leaders of ministries outside of Harvest. James has enlisted the aid of staff, including pastors and elders to slander us, calling us deceptive if we haven’t spoken, or divisive if they believe we have. This lie has been spread not only about us, but about many godly people. Apparently simply to leave Harvest is viewed as “betrayal”.

We sought counsel and were advised not to answer to the slander or engage in dialog with any of these people. We followed this counsel and yet there is a pandemic of strife encircling the globe and dividing even families and close friends – the ultimate result of one man’s actions. Long-time friendships have been utterly decimated.

We did not spread strife or discord. On the contrary, we were painstakingly careful not to. Time and again James used his power and influence to deliberately harm us. The slander continued unabated for over two years. Then suddenly and unannounced, James showed up at my office to “reconcile”. I was not there and am not interested in being maneuvered into “reconciling” with someone so that he can use me in his sermon illustration. James has never repented of nor even acknowledged his sinful actions. This absolution continues to be his stance and that of his elders, made clear by last weekend’s Harvest video. We have forgiven James and the many people he has manipulated against us for his gain and our loss. We are not bitter, just very much aware of the tactics and strategies of James MacDonald.

There has been a revision of history taking place at Harvest. Only one perspective is given and there is no opportunity for those who would refute such things. We have prayed consistently for the Lord’s will to be done. We have never tried to convince anyone to leave Harvest. We have only prayed that people would have eyes to see and ears to hear, being fully convinced in their own minds of the choices they must make; choices for which we must give an account to the Lord someday.

The elder board this past weekend said that they are “completely satisfied” with James’ character. This on-going strife is all a result of this man’s character. James just lost three of his best elders. The men around him are not helping him but hurting him. I have told this to two current elders who have contacted me in the last couple of months.

We have not been divisive or deceptive or ever posted anything before this response. In many ways we feel we should have spoken out earlier but we chose to remain silent out of deference for many good people at Harvest. Now, however, I cannot stand back and see the godly reputations of former elders and friends be destroyed.

We stand behind Scott Phelps, Barry Slabaugh, Dan Marquardt and others who have asked simple questions that elders are required to ask and to be given full and satisfactory answers. The church discipline being done is just wrong. People should not be disciplined over the Internet and they should not be disciplined for something the elders are assuming they will do. In fact, church discipline in no way applies to these men. These actions are the result of James' continuing pattern of using and abusing people.

So much more could be said. But my purpose here is to support the godly men who have been wrongly disciplined by the church and others who have been wrongfully terminated or forced to leave.

When the church ceases to be about the truth, it ceases to be the church. The Lord will bring truth to light, in His time and in His way. I am fulfilling my duty to warn.

Dave Corning