

COMPLAINT

KUEHNER v. GLGP

THIS FORMAL COMPLAINT TO THE SYNOD OF THE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF NORTH AMERICA (RPCNA), IS HEREBY SUBMITTED ON THIS 17TH DAY OF MARCH IN THE YEAR 2023

BY

ADAM KUEHNER

v.

GREAT LAKES-GULF PRESBYTERY (GLGP)

FOR

ITS MANIFEST “MALADMINISTRATION”¹ IN RESPONDING TO THE IRPC SESSION’S RESTORATION OF MR. OLIVETTI TO COMMUNION WITH A BARE REBUKE, UNACCOMPANIED BY ADEQUATE PASTORAL AND/OR JUDICIAL ACTION, THEREBY NEGLECTING TO UPHOLD AT LEAST FOUR OF THE FIVE PURPOSES OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE, AS SET FORTH IN THE RPCNA BOOK OF DISCIPLINE;² NAMELY,

(1) To reclaim a sinning member, (2) To deter others from similar offenses, (3) To maintain the honor of Christ and the purity and peace of His Church; and (4) To avoid the wrath of God coming upon the Church;

WHICH NEGLECT IS EVIDENT IN THE MINUTES OF THE GLGP’S 2023 SPRING MEETING, MOST NOTABLY BY THE OMISSION OF APPROPRIATE PASTORAL AND/OR JUDICIAL DUTIES, AND ALSO BY THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS:

- The GLGP voted not to entertain a motion “to form a five-man judicial commission appointed by the moderator with authority to institute (and, as needed, bring to completion) judicial process against Sam Carr, Josh Karshen, and Matt Wilburn for their respective roles in the publicly known decision and/or action of the IRPC session to serve communion to Jared Olivetti while he remained under suspension by the synod.”³
- The GLGP voted merely to rebuke “elders Sam Carr and Josh Karshen for voting to admit Jared Olivetti to the Lord’s Table.”⁴
- The court voted down a motion to “appoint a three-man AIC-appointed shepherding committee to follow up with the IRPC session on the rebuke issued by the court, and report back to the presbytery with its counsel at its next meeting”;⁵

FOR WHICH CAUSE, THE COMPLAINANT HEREBY URGES SYNOD TO SUSTAIN THE SUBSTANCE OF THIS COMPLAINT, WHICH IS AS FOLLOWS: That the Great Lakes-Gulf Presbytery erred in responding to the IRPC session’s restoration of Mr. Olivetti to communion with a bare rebuke, unaccompanied by adequate pastoral and/or judicial action, thereby failing to uphold at least four of the five purposes of church discipline, as set forth in the RPCNA *Book of Discipline*; namely, (1) To reclaim a sinning member, (2) To deter others from similar offenses, (3) To maintain the honor of Christ and the purity and peace of His Church; and (4) To avoid the wrath of God coming upon the Church.

¹ WCF 31.3 (A-102): It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith and cases of conscience, to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of His Church; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in His Word. Acts 15:15, 19, 24, 27-31; Acts 16:4; Matt. 18:17-20.

² BOD I.1.3 (E-3): Five purposes of church discipline are: primarily, to reclaim a sinning member, then to deter others from similar offenses; to maintain the honor of Christ and the purity and peace of His Church; to maintain the truth of the gospel; and to avoid the wrath of God coming upon the church.

³ GLGP Minutes (3/3/23): It was moved and seconded to lay the recommendation on the table to entertain the following substitute: “That presbytery form a five-man judicial commission appointed by the moderator with authority to institute (and, as needed, bring to completion) judicial process against Sam Carr, Josh Karshen, and Matt Wilburn for their respective roles in the publicly known decision and/or action of the IRPC session to serve communion to Jared Olivetti while he remained under suspension by the synod.” This motion was defeated, thereby returning the discussion to Rec. 1A.

⁴ GLGP Minutes (3/4/23): The court proceeded to discuss the committee’s third recommendation (Rec. 3) [That presbytery hereby rebukes elders Sam Carr and Josh Karshens for voting to admit Jared Olivetti to the Lord’s Table.], which carried, with James Odom registering his dissent. It was moved, seconded, and carried that presbytery instruct the IRPC session not to admit Jared Olivetti to the Lord’s Table until the synod’s censure of suspension is lifted. James Odom registered his dissent.

⁵ GLGP Minutes (3/4/23): It was moved (but failed to receive a second) that presbytery instruct the IRPC Resolution Committee to follow up with the IRPC session on the rebuke issued by the court, and report back to the presbytery with its counsel at its next meeting. It was moved and seconded that presbytery create a three-man AIC-appointed shepherding committee to follow up with the IRPC session on the rebuke issued by the court, and report back to the presbytery with its counsel at its next meeting. This motion was defeated by a vote of 10-15.

Kuehner v. GLGP ~ The Reasons for the Complaint (Memorandum)

A Brief Introduction

Over the years, as a GLGP delegate, I have witnessed many student exams, conducted by a variety of different examiners. One recurring theology exam question that always caught my attention was “Do you love the RPCNA for what she is, or for what she could be?” (Veterans of the GLGP will immediately recognize the examiner.) My initial reaction to this question was to regard it as a false dichotomy. Surely one could love the RPCNA for what she is, *and* for what she will be, *and* perhaps even for what she once was. Over time, however, I realized that I had been missing the point of the question. The examiner was not downplaying the principle of *semper reformanda*. He was seeking to identify whether the student’s love for the RPCNA (its principles and its people) was *conditional*, being entirely predicated on the denomination’s gradual conformity to the student’s own personal opinions. By contrast, the love of Christ for His Bride is, of course, *unconditional*. His love for us is the source, not the result, of reformation.⁶ The examiner’s question, therefore, was a necessary one. *Do I love the church merely because she always does (or will do) what I think is right?* This is a question that I felt compelled to ask myself as I sat down to write this complaint,⁷ and I want to begin by revealing my honest answer. I know I said the introduction would be brief, but humor me for just a moment.

Words cannot express my sincere love and appreciation for the Great Lakes-Gulf Presbytery — not merely the institution, but the people, the delegates, *all* of them, including those who may not appreciate this complaint, and those on the IRPC session, whom I’ve enjoyed getting to know in recent months. My main love language is service and the Lord knows that I have sought to love this presbytery and its delegates with all of my strength, especially in recent years. This is the presbytery where I first came under care in 2006 and where, barring unforeseen developments, I hope they will one day read my memorial (2 Kings 4:13). The GLGP is a family; admittedly dysfunctional at times, but a family nonetheless. We offend with our words and then we forgive. We quarrel and then we work things out. I believe that we are presently in the process of working things out, and the synod has been instrumental in guiding us through this valley of tears. How so? *By adjudicating our complaints and helping to bear our burdens*. It is a thankless job, but not an unfruitful one. It may not always look like it from the outside, but these things have helped us in a big way.

Now more than ever, we need ongoing feedback and support from the synod. That is ultimately what this complaint is about. It is not an accusation of sin against the presbytery. It is not an effort to make certain people look bad and other people look good. It is not an attempt to settle an old score, to squeeze blood from a turnip, or to have the GLGP censured. It is simply a cry for help. By ruling on the substance of this complaint, the synod is in a position to provide us with valuable feedback and direction ‘just in case’, God forbid, something like this should ever happen again.

The Public Facts

It is now a well-known public fact that the IRPC session voted on 12/1/22 to restore Mr. Olivetti to communion (2-1, M. Wilburn dissenting),⁸ despite the Synod commission’s decision not to lift his suspension. It is also a well-known public fact, confirmed by witnesses and recorded on video livestream, that the session has been serving Mr. Olivetti communion. The IRPC elders have neither been shy to acknowledge this fact, nor unwilling to provide an explanation concerning the session’s rationale. Every indication is that they are moving forward with their policy intact and that they have no plans for further interaction with the GLGP or its IRPC Resolution Committee (on which I served). One thing I have greatly appreciated about these three men is their willingness to be straightforward and respectful in their dealings with us. They have not minced words or attempted to hide their plans. They are *done* with the GLGP and plan to continue admitting Mr. Olivetti to the Lord’s Supper. By the time this complaint comes to synod, it is possible that they will have already resigned from the session, disorganized the congregation, and transitioned into the context of elder-led ecclesiastical independence, at least for the time being. All of these public facts were known to the GLGP at (or during) its spring meeting on March 2-4.

Men Under Authority

As a prerequisite for ordination to the eldership, we require men to affirm Query 9, which reads, “Do you promise subjection in the Lord to the courts of this church, and engage to follow no divisive courses from the doctrine and order which the church has solemnly recognized and adopted; and do you promise to submit to all the brotherly counsel which your brethren may tender you in the Lord?” Even a brief contemplation of this vow raises numerous questions pertaining to our current situation. For instance:

What message are we sending to local RPCNA members when we require *them* to submit to *their* elders (CCM 4), yet permit a session of *elders* to continue shepherding in open defiance of a higher court (i.e. synod)?

If elders are not required to submit to higher courts, why should any Christian be required to submit to any other Christian (or to any group of Christians)?

If a blatant, willful, and ongoing breach of Query 9 is not grounds for authorizing judicial process against an elder, what is?

If the keeping of ordination vows is no longer a prerequisite for retaining one’s ordination, why not abandon such vows altogether?

⁶ This is not to deny that the Savior takes special delight in our obedience. We speak here of the love of *benevolence*, not of *complacency*.

⁷ I am the sole author and signatory of this complaint, and have made it a point, in this particular instance, not to seek additional signatories.

⁸ Throughout this complaint, references to “IRPC session” and “IRPC elders” should be interpreted in light of Mr. Wilburn’s dissent.

If sessions are free, at their own discretion, to ‘take back original jurisdiction’ of a synodical discipline case (as the IRPC elders maintain) and reverse synod’s verdict, then why have a synod at all? Why have a denomination? Why have presbyteries? Why even have local sessions? Why not discard church discipline altogether and let every man do what is right in his own eyes?

Vow-keeping and submission to church authority⁹ are not Reformed Presbyterian distinctives; they are recognized Christian duties. If the IRPC elders join another Reformed or Presbyterian denomination, they will be expected to keep their ordination vows and to respect the disciplinary censures of a higher court. Therefore, until these brothers demonstrate that they can function as ‘men under authority’, their lack of submission to the RPCNA renders them unfit to serve as elders in *any* context.

It is axiomatic within a historic Presbyterian ecclesiastical framework that elders who persist in open, active, ongoing defiance of a higher court should be deposed (or at least suspended) from the eldership. If this is controversial, it is only so because we have ceased to operate within a historic Presbyterian ecclesiastical framework. Ordination is a sacred trust bestowed by God through the instrumentality of the church exercising the keys of the kingdom according to Scripture. If the church confers ordination upon condition of certain doctrinal or ethical promises,¹⁰ then the deliberate violation of these promises obligates the church to take back what she has given, lest she share in the sins that follow (1 Tim. 5:22). What the church has loosed, she must once again bind, on the same grounds and with the same authority. To reply that *ordination comes from God* is to miss the point. Ordination comes from God in the same way that every rightful use of the keys of the kingdom comes from God (Matt. 16:18): *mediately through the biblical exercise of church authority*. To put it another way, ordination comes from God, but so does deposition, suspension from the sacrament, and a host of other ecclesiastical actions.

According to Larger Catechism 45 (Cf. WCF 30), “Christ executeth the office of a king, in calling out of the world a people to himself, and giving them officers, laws, and censures, by which he visibly governs them.” To violate the scriptural terms of office or to disregard lawful disciplinary censures is not primarily an offense against a church or a denomination (though it is that); it is primarily an offense against King Jesus, who visibly governs His Church by these means. If we love the King, this should bother us.

The Appropriateness of a Rebuke

The RPCNA *Book of Discipline* (I.4.1b, E-5) defines a rebuke as follows: “This is a censure for a more aggravated sin and is commonly used by the court in cases of active transgression or of continued neglect of duty in spite of counsel. It consists of authoritative reproof in the name of Christ, and a call for repentance and reformation of life. The court may also make the people under its oversight publicly aware of the fact of and reason for the rebuke. (See Suggested Form [28]).”

At face value, given this definition, it is not at all surprising that the GLGP selected *rebuke* as an appropriate censure for the IRPC elders. Their sin of restoring Mr. Olivetti to communion was aggravated. It involved an active transgression and continued neglect of duty in spite of unambiguous counsel from synod and its judicial commission. There is no question, in theory, that a rebuke was needed. However, this fact raises three additional questions: (1) What *kind* of rebuke was needed? (2) How should the rebuke have been *administered*? (3) Did the offense warrant *only* a rebuke? Each of these questions deserves to be answered.

1. What kind of rebuke was needed? A rebuke is more than a token acknowledgement that sin has occurred. It is more than a brief notation to be recorded in the minutes for posterity. It is a God-ordained disciplinary censure aimed at reclaiming a sinner to repentance (Lev. 19:17), deterring similar offenses, maintaining Christ’s honor, and protecting His sheep. As noted above, a rebuke “consists of authoritative reproof in the name of Christ, and a call for repentance and reformation of life” as exemplified in Form 28.¹¹ A call to repentance does not merely command the offender to cease and desist from an outwardly sinful action. It calls for a heartfelt *confession* of that sin, followed by an inward *turning* from that sin to the Lord Jesus Christ and His fruitful path of new obedience (WLC 87). If all Scripture is profitable for rebuke and correction (2 Tim. 3:16), then, ordinarily, we would also expect a rebuke to include at least some allusion to relevant Scripture passages, as a means of persuading the offending brother of his error.

Sadly, none of these biblical/constitutional elements factored into the GLGP’s rebuke of the IRPC elders. Instead, motions were carried “That presbytery hereby rebukes elders Sam Carr and Josh Karshens for voting to admit Jared Olivetti to the Lord’s Table” and “that presbytery instruct the IRPC session not to admit Jared Olivetti to the Lord’s Table until the synod’s censure of suspension

⁹ Some will argue that the IRPC elders had a duty to follow their conscience. Ordination Query 9 limits our promised submission to that which is “in the Lord”, they say. Quite right, but, as King Uzziah found out the hard way, the Lord never calls us to exercise authority which exceeds our providential place and calling. For example, if I see someone driving 100 mph down the highway next Friday night, the Lord is not calling me to ‘pull them over’ and administer a sobriety test at gunpoint. If my conscience is telling me to do this, then perhaps I am the one in need of a sobriety test. The Lord would never command me to enforce traffic laws, because he has not given me this authority. The same principle applies here. The Lord cannot *possibly* be commanding the IRPC elders to reverse Mr. Olivetti’s synodical censure, because He has not given local elders this authority (Cf. WCF 20:4).

¹⁰ We distinguish here between (A) Those essential doctrinal and ethical matters which are common to orthodox, Bible-believing “true churches” throughout all ages and places of the world, the denial of which must result in deposition from church office; and (B) Those intramural doctrinal and ethical matters which divide the orthodox Christian world into different denominations, such that, one’s denial of his denomination’s position on such a matter would result, more likely, in his transfer to another branch of the church than in his deposition from office.

¹¹ Form 28: “You, _____, by your continued neglect of your Christian duty and by the sin of _____, have brought reproach on yourself, and have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to mock and curse. This Court of Christ sadly and solemnly judges and rebukes you for your sin. You are commanded to give evidence of sincere repentance, and to be more watchful, studying to know and to do the will of God.”

is lifted.” No call to confess or repent of sins already committed. No employment of scriptural persuasion to reclaim the offender. Just a bare rebuke followed by an order to cease and desist, which bears no resemblance to either the spirit or the letter of Form 28.

2. How should the rebuke have been administered? When the GLGP carried the motion to rebuke Elders Sam Carr and Josh Karshen, neither of these men were in the room and neither had attended any portion of the presbytery meeting. Neither the rebuke nor the instructions to stop serving Mr. Olivetti communion were administered directly to them by the court itself or by a representative of the court.¹² No action was taken to appoint a delegate (or committee) to administer the rebuke and provide pastoral follow-up. Immediately after the passage of these motions, I attempted to rectify this oversight by moving “that presbytery create a three-man AIC-appointed shepherding committee to follow up with the IRPC session on the rebuke issued by the court, and report back to the presbytery with its counsel at its next meeting.” This motion was defeated by a vote of 10-15.

Later that day, the court adjourned without having designated any entity to administer its rebuke (or convey its instructions) either in person or in writing. As clerk, I was never instructed to do so, and it is not our pattern in the GLGP to place such pastoral duties in the hands of the clerk. We typically appoint a shepherding committee to interact with the parties involved and report back to the court.¹³ But not this time. This time, we simply recorded a rebuke in the minutes and that was it. If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? What about a rebuke that is never administered?¹⁴

3. Did the offense warrant only a rebuke? Nearly everyone would agree that the actions of the IRPC session *clearly* warranted a rebuke. But did those actions warrant *only* a rebuke — a *bare* rebuke without further steps of judicial process? This is *not* so clear.

The RPCNA *Book of Discipline* (I.4.1d, E-5) defines *deposition* as follows: “This is the disciplinary removal of an ordained officer of the church from his office... This censure shall be imposed for serious offenses in doctrine or in conduct that obviously disqualify the person for exercising office.” Similarly, in the previous section, we find the definition of *suspension* (from office): “This is the temporary exclusion from... the exercise of ordained office” which “becomes necessary” when the ordained officer is “guilty of gross or of persistent neglect.”

In the RPCNA, we distinguish between *lesser* censures of admonition and rebuke, and the *greater* censures of suspension, deposition, and excommunication, which require the institution of judicial process. The GLGP’s rebuke of the IRPC elders was a lesser censure which did not involve judicial process, *e.g. filing charges, forming an accusation, conducting a trial, etc.* It was a ‘one and done’ action, unaccompanied by any ongoing judicial (or, sadly, pastoral) engagement. In order to justify such a response, the GLGP would need to demonstrate that the offense in question (i.e. the IRPC session’s ongoing defiance of the syndical censure) does not rise to the level of a suspension or deposition from office. Biblically and constitutionally, such a perspective is indefensible.

By unlawfully nullifying synod’s censure and serving the Lord’s holy sacrament to a suspended member, the IRPC session willfully violated Ordination Query 9 (Cf. CCM 4), as has been demonstrated above. Without question, these are “serious offenses... in conduct that obviously disqualify the person for exercising office.” In cases of suspension, an elder may only be restored to office based upon “evidence of repentance”. In other words, when an elder commits a serious offense, blatantly violating the terms of his ordination, he remains sidelined from ordained shepherding ministry until he has publicly confessed his sin and demonstrated a visible pattern of heartfelt new obedience. By contrast, as I am writing this complaint, the IRPC elders remain RPCNA officers in good standing (a fact they have openly acknowledged),¹⁵ despite stating that they are ‘done’ interacting with the GLGP and despite continuing to defend Mr. Olivetti’s unlawful restoration. Is this evidence of repentance? If not, then why does their ordination remain intact, with no ongoing judicial process in place to address the matter?¹⁶ Something doesn’t seem right here.

¹² Undoubtedly, Elder Carr and Elder Karshen have been made aware that a rebuke was issued by way of information. However, informing someone that a rebuke has been issued is not the same thing as directly administering the rebuke in the name of Christ and on behalf of the court.

¹³ For instance, last October, when we decided not to recognize IRPC’s vote to leave the denomination, we appointed the IRPC Resolution Committee (on which I served) to “That presbytery task the GLG 22-21 committee with communicating the contents of the resolutions regarding the IRPC elders and congregation, listening to the elders and congregation, and discussing appropriate next steps.” A similar “shepherding committee” was appointed when we instituted process against the IRPC elders in 2021. This has been standard operating procedure in the GLGP.

¹⁴ More could be said regarding the biblical requirement of rebuking elders publicly (1 Tim. 5:19-20), and the propriety of administering the rebuke in the presence of the IRPC congregation where the offense took place, but I will leave that alone for now.

¹⁵ The IRPC session certified its delegates for the recent GLGP spring meeting and sent Elder Matt Wilburn, who actively participated and, on at least one occasion, voted on a student exam. By relating this fact, I am not seeking to be critical of Mr. Wilburn or the session. I encouraged them to certify and send delegates. My point is that some in the RPCNA are suggesting that the IRPC session’s decision to serve Mr. Olivetti communion is predicated on their conviction that they are no longer under the RPCNA’s authority. This is totally inaccurate.

¹⁶ At our recent spring meeting, a motion was made to entertain the following motion: “That presbytery form a five-man judicial commission appointed by the moderator with authority to institute (and, as needed, bring to completion) judicial process against Sam Carr, Josh Karshen, and Matt Wilburn for their respective roles in the publicly known decision and/or action of the IRPC session to serve communion to Jared Olivetti while he remained under suspension by the synod.” This motion would not have *guaranteed* judicial process, but simply authorized the commission to make that decision. Also, it distinguished between the *decision* to reverse synod’s censure (made by Elders Carr and Karshen, with Wilburn dissenting) and the *action* of serving Mr. Olivetti communion (all three elders participating). Hence, one could hold the view that Mr. Wilburn deserved a lesser censure (or none at all) and still vote for it. Unfortunately, the GLGP chose not to entertain it, and never circled back to reconsider the matter.

Five Purposes of Church Discipline

Echoing the substance of WCF 30.3,¹⁷ the *Book of Discipline* (I.1.3, E-3) lists the following “Five purposes of church discipline”: (1) “To reclaim a sinning member” (2) “To deter others from similar offenses” (3) “To maintain the honor of Christ and the purity and peace of His Church” (4) “To maintain the truth of the gospel” and (5) “To avoid the wrath of God coming upon the church.”

The disciplinary rebuke issued by the GLGP against Elders Carr and Karshen fell far short of the biblical and confessional standard enumerated in these five points. Setting aside Point #4 as a matter for further contemplation, it is evident that the GLGP’s rebuke failed to meet each of the other four criteria. In itself, this is reason enough to sustain my complaint, as will be seen in what follows.

1. TO RECLAIM A SINNING MEMBER. The GLGP’s bare rebuke of Elders Carr and Karshen bears no resemblance to the sort of pastoral, *restoration*-oriented disciplinary action required by Scripture and our constitution. No provision was made for the rebuke to be administered directly to the offenders. No shepherding committee was appointed for pastoral follow-up. No scripture citations or allusions were employed. No call for heartfelt confession and repentance was issued. In short, no effort was made to leave the ninety and nine to seek and restore these straying shepherds. This is the primary aim of church discipline and it was totally ignored.

2. TO DETER OTHERS FROM SIMILAR OFFENSES. During the recent spring meeting, Mr. Wilburn confirmed that IRPC was scheduled to observe the Lord’s Supper the day after adjournment. All indications from the elders, both in public and in private, seem to reinforce their intention to continue serving Mr. Olivetti communion without looking back. Issuing a bare rebuke, without judicial process, can only serve to reinforce their current trajectory. Given their stated desire to join another Presbyterian denomination, the retention of their valid ordination as NAPARC elders cannot be underestimated. They may now leave the RPCNA with their ordinations and their flock, with no sizable or enduring consequences. This does nothing to deter them from continuing in their sinful defiance of church authority. Worst of all, it sets a precedent that local sessions may nullify synodical decisions, verdicts, and censures without any real consequences to deter them from violating their ordination vows in this dreadful manner.

3. TO MAINTAIN THE HONOR OF CHRIST AND THE PURITY AND PEACE OF HIS CHURCH. Mr. Olivetti’s unlawful restoration to communion has brought great dishonor to Christ in all three of His mediatorial offices, and the GLGP’s inadequate response has enabled this dishonor to continue unchecked.

As our Great Prophet, the Lord Jesus Christ has spoken from heaven through the courts of His church in calling Mr. Olivetti to “bring forth the fruits of repentance” (Matt. 3:8; Heb. 12:25). By unlawfully restoring Mr. Olivetti to the Lord’s Table, the IRPC elders (however laudable their intentions) are proclaiming a rival prophetic message, “For they have healed the hurt of the daughter of My people slightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ when there is no peace” (Jer. 8:11).

As our Great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ is truly present in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, feeding our faith with the spiritual nourishment and blessed communion of His broken body and poured out blood (1 Cor. 10:16-17). To safeguard this holy ordinance, along with the peace and purity of His church, He requires worthy participants to come in repentance, barring impenitent offenders who “will not hear the church” (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:11), lest “he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body” (1 Cor. 11:29). Biblically speaking, to serve communion to an offender who openly refuses to “hear the church” (or to bring forth the discernible fruits of repentance) is a flagrant sacrilege which, according to the Apostle, dishonors the broken body and shed blood of our Great High Priest.

As our Great King, the Lord Jesus Christ has established “officers, laws, and censures, by which he visibly governs” His Church (WLC 45). He has bestowed the “keys of the kingdom” which, when employed biblically, bear heaven’s seal of approval (Matt. 16:18-19). As King, the Lord Jesus has established Presbyterianism as the permanent form of church government, in which *broader* regional assemblies of elders possess *higher* authority over their constituent congregations (Acts 15). Our King assures us that wherever two or three elders are gathered together in His name, He is present among them (Matt. 18:20). Therefore, it greatly dishonors our Lord’s kingship for a local session to usurp the higher authority of a broader court by seeking to reverse a synodical censure. Regardless of our personal opinions about the IRPC discipline case, surely we can all agree that the King has not given lower courts authority over higher courts. As was said to King Uzziah, “This does not pertain to you!” (2 Chron. 26:18).¹⁸

¹⁷ WCF 30.3: Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offenses, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.

¹⁸ The *Minutes of Synod* (1924-26), along with corresponding presbytery minutes, record a case involving Rev. S.J. Johnston, a minister in the Philadelphia Presbytery who was deposed for adultery with a woman from Clarinda, and faced ongoing judicial process against his membership. Having moved from Iowa to Pennsylvania (then to Florida), his case came before the synod due to questions of jurisdiction. Prior to Johnston’s trial, he confessed his sin to a synod judicial commission, seeking restoration of his membership. Dissatisfied with his confession, the commission paused for a season of prayer and then agreed to grant him a letter of standing with charges attached, thereby dismissing him in lieu of a trial (1925 MoS, 104-105). Johnston then moved to Orlando, where he could still worship as an adherent. At some point, the Orlando session restored his membership and served him communion, without consulting the synod. The 1926 Synod ruled that this action “savors of the spirit of defiance of the authority of superior judicatories, and practically defeats the end of discipline, reversing or setting aside the decision of a higher court, and of the highest court of this ecclesiastical body” (1926 MoS, 49-50). After nullifying Johnston’s restoration, the synod appointed “a commission competent to act at any time said minister desires to return to membership.” Evidently, the court was not content merely to condemn the session’s actions. It took further steps to protect the Lord’s table in Orlando, and it would appear that they were successful in doing so. (While I take full responsibility for the content of this footnote, I want to thank Nathaniel Pockras for bringing this episode to light and helping me to understand it.)

Concerning the purity and peace of the church, there is no question that serious damage has been done. Since Mr. Olivetti's restoration to the Lord's Table, many former and current RPCNA officers and members have utilized both email and social media to flood the internet with divisive words, either celebrating or scorning the actions of the IRPC elders. "Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" (1 Cor. 5:6). Biblically speaking, the proper response to all of this is simple. Christ has given us all the pastoral and judicial tools we need to maintain His honor and to safeguard the peace and purity of His Church. Why then has the GLGP chosen not to utilize these tools?

4. **TO AVOID THE WRATH OF GOD COMING UPON THE CHURCH.** As a general rule, when God's holy ordinances are openly dishonored by those who should know better, misery tends to follow. This was true of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:3), Dathan and Abiram (Num. 16), the Israelites at Baal Peor (Num. 25), the men of Beth Shemesh (1 Sam. 6:19), Uzzah the Priest (1 Sam. 6:7), King Uzziah (2 Chron. 26:19), Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), and various church members in Corinth (1 Cor. 11:28f) and Thyatira (Rev. 2:20-23). Moreover, Israel's defeat at Ai (Joshua 7) reminds us that such chastisements are not always limited to specific offenders, but can sometimes extend more broadly to the entire people of God. By not taking the appropriate action to address open sin in the church, we not only *risk* such judgments; we *invite* them. "Do not be deceived. God is not mocked" (Gal. 6:7).

Conclusion

An 84 year old evangelist (and former *Motown* performer) recently stopped by our church after the evening service to introduce himself. During our conversation, he posed the following question to a group of us: "What is the largest room in the world?" We knew there was a punchline coming, but couldn't manage to come up with any educated guesses as to what it was. "The room for improvement!" he said with a smile, after several moments of silence. And he was right. This truly is the largest room in the world.

There is much to appreciate about the GLGP. It is my home presbytery and I love it very much. Nevertheless, like all of us, it has room for improvement. The sole purpose of this complaint is to obtain the feedback necessary to help the GLGP improve in a vital area of its ecclesiastical remit. Our response to the IRPC session's restoration of Mr. Olivetti to communion was entirely inadequate. From a pastoral standpoint, we made no effort to reclaim the offenders or even call them to heartfelt repentance. From a judicial standpoint, we allowed two RPCNA elders to violate their ordination vows in willful defiance of synodical authority and walk away with their ordinations in good standing. Without question, our handling of this matter was out of step with at least four of the five purposes of church discipline, as set forth in the RPCNA *Book of Discipline*. Room for improvement? Absolutely.

Under the circumstances, I genuinely believe that the oversights outlined and demonstrated in this complaint were unintentional. I feel I need to say this because there are some who may want to portray the GLGP in a way that I find to be unfair and offensive. These are challenging times for our presbytery, and I have no doubt that our delegates are doing their best. For my own part, there are things I wish I would have said or done at our spring meeting, and I suspect that many others feel similarly. This all happened so fast and much of it was unfamiliar territory for us. What we need right now is your honest and charitable feedback — the faithful wounds of a *friend*. I truly believe that sustaining this complaint will put us in a better position to handle these situations more effectively in the future. Thank you for your willingness to read and consider my complaint. I pray that the Lord will use it "for edification and not for destruction" (2 Cor. 13:10).

Respectfully submitted,
Adam Kuehner