

Brothers,

I'm writing to some of you who are or may be going to the RPCNA synod meeting next week. I am praying for you. Synod's commission to oversee Jared Olivetti recommends that synod excommunicate him (whether or not it has that procedural or pastoral right). Based on the trajectory, I do not expect just or merciful treatment of the former Immanuel ruling elders David Carr, Ben Larson, and Keith Magill, or current ruling elders Sam Carr, Josh Karshen, and Matt Wilburn. These are weighty matters.

For your own sake, I am writing to encourage you to take this matter seriously.

I have known Jared for over 25 years, and most closely over the last two and a half years. He is walking with God through faith and repentance in Jesus Christ. I am thankful he is safe in Jesus. You can speak with many others who are also walking closely with him, like his elders, and they will tell you the same thing. You will see the same graces in the hearts and lives of David, Ben, and Keith and in the current ruling elders. You should contact the people who know them best before you quite possibly bring condemnation on yourselves through your actions.

As you know, there were terrible cases of minor-on-minor sexual abuse in the church these men served. Many children were deeply hurt, which we all grieve. Jesus takes sin seriously, and so do we. The dispute surrounded how these matters were dealt with by the Immanuel leadership.

Two sides developed over time. One side decided to bring great publicity to the event and to subject certain minors to great exposure in their effort to attack the leaders.

The other side (with which I have joined) was not willing to offer a robust public defense and alternative narrative. Why? Because to do so would have unnecessarily exposed even more minors. This posture has prohibited us from participating in the forums the RP church unrighteously demanded. We are aware that this decision has meant that adults have endured unrighteous suffering, but it has been worth it for the sake of the children. It will still be worth it, even if we are all condemned by the RPCNA.

Immanuel's now-former session faced many difficult decisions in a remarkably challenging situation; they did not handle everything perfectly. They acknowledged their mistakes and repented early in the process. They had made such statements of repentance long before their trial (without any defense) and negotiations. Never were the elders guilty of the things that were insinuated through the smoke-and-mirrors tactics employed by so many who opposed them.

As the church courts pressed forward through the past several years, many of us objected strenuously to their flawed methodology and spirit. Misrepresentations, half-truths, and worse prevailed through repeated use. Media coverage and social media frenzy created an environment in which the court of public opinion carried the day. Within the corrupt processes, a particular narrative was developed which could not be corrected apart from unrighteously exposing many minors. A "guilty until proven innocent" framework, combined with the functional

blackmail threat of media coverage, created a toxic environment. Men in positions of authority at various points in the process who should have stood for justice cowered. Other elders have pled ignorance and put implicit faith in the church courts, even though they could see the corruption at hand. The only legitimate way forward for synod would have been to start the investigation from the beginning. But the church courts declined to pursue a path that could produce true justice. These decisions compounded into many more unjust decisions and repercussions.

Even after last year's synod upheld the Synod Judicial Commission's conviction of Jared, he continued to work with the commission assigned to him. He sought to live peaceably with all men, so far as it depended on him. After working through his months-old statements of repentance, the commission reached a point where it could not identify what more Jared needed to repent of, only noting that people were still angry. His follow-up commission refused to allow him to return to the Lord's Supper. When a commission cannot even articulate the accusations against a man, then on what biblical grounds can they support discipline? To do justice would have meant for the commission to acknowledge that synod was wrong in the first place. It is easy to see how the fear of man would keep men from doing righteousness.

The former ruling elders, Keith, Ben, and David have also confessed failings and sin. They have been told that it has been discerned that they are not truly repentant and broken. They have been told that reconciliation will only be possible if they confess that they believe in their hearts that what was done to Jared was just. The commission that oversaw them has blocked them from reconciliation and encouraged offended parties not to meet with them.

These men sought forgiveness early in this long process, but it has never been granted. Not by individuals, and not by the court. None can claim ignorance. You read the statements of confession last year. The RPCNA is objectively unforgiving. Jesus reminds people that if they will not forgive, they will not be forgiven.

The RPCNA has foisted division upon people, and has encouraged the opposite of forgiveness and reconciliation. Further, it has weaponized presbyterianism to exacerbate divisions beyond the bounds of the RPCNA into the PCA and farther still. These tactics have worked because the RP church courts have built a whole case upon injustice.

The central problem is that the courts of the RPCNA have set aside the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. An emphasis on retribution rather than restoration carried the day. The gospel of God declares that the wrath of God has been propitiated through the sacrificial offering of Jesus Christ. The RP church has set forth a counterfeit gospel which promises that angry people can be satisfied through the ugly sacrifice of the former leaders of the Immanuel Church. But only the blood of Christ will satisfy. When our hope is that angry people can be satisfied, then legalism, litigation, cruelty, and hypocrisy abound. When man-made requirements supercede Scriptures, we lose sight of Christ Jesus, who is full of grace and truth. The RP church must teach people to take their hurts to the cross. They must learn that there is bountiful forgiveness in him, for all who come to him. Only in him will anyone find wholeness. Satisfaction will not come to anyone's soul by cherishing the destruction of another mere man. The only solution is

to press into redemption in Christ. This is not a peripheral doctrinal matter over which Christians may differ. We are dealing with the very core of Christianity. The RPCNA has set it aside.

Even now, the commissions dealing with these former leaders cannot articulate the sins these men committed originally (at least not any sins that these men have not already confessed). Today, the charge for Jared is insubordination, which is a poor substitute for real substance. Discipline that is wrong, unreasonable, or excessive says more about the ones in authority than the ones being disciplined.

Some of you know these charges are unjust and yet refuse to give the bread and the cup of forgiveness to Jared or others under the same sentence. I urge you, since you know they are in Christ, please welcome them as Christ has welcomed them.

The Apostle Paul called out similar hypocrisy in Peter in Galatians. Peter was nullifying the grace of God in order to pacify the Judaizers by refusing to break bread with/for others who were justified by grace. Peter wanted to get along with everyone who claimed faith in Christ, but nothing less than the gospel itself was at stake for Paul. He would not stand such behavior even for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved. He was willing to force the issue with Peter because of its central importance. Peter could not choose to eat with the Gentile believers in some settings and deny them in others.

Augustine and other church leaders of his day recognized the need to withstand the Donatists. They were the purists of that day who would not receive all who repented and confessed Christ as Lord. The leaders of the church recognized that those who refuse to forgive others actually gut the Christian religion of its essence and cannot be regarded as legitimate leaders.

Any elder who does not receive Jared (or others who may be similarly condemned) at the Lord's Table is just as objectively unforgiving as those who vote to condemn. To extend the bread and the cup is to acknowledge that the recipient is forgiven in Christ. To withhold that grace is to declare that the man or woman is unforgiven and that Jesus has no place at his table for the person.

Feeling these tensions, it is no surprise that many people have expressed a desire for Immanuel Church to simply go away. But God has not been pleased to dissolve these people from the earth. Though greatly mistreated, they are growing in Christ. This congregation of some 125 people continues to gather to serve the Lord under its new leadership. The Lord has placed them here, in part, to reveal who you are, and so that you might be changed.

The consequences of RPCNA decisions have already been enormously destructive. They will continue to be apart from a change of heart. These decisions are not like doctrinal or procedural decisions with which a person may disagree in an impersonal way. These decisions will help determine how you treat particular individuals in an ongoing way for the rest of your lives.

There will be people in the dock next week, but it will not be Jared nor the elders. It will be the synod itself. I pray that the Lord will give you courage to speak out as you rely on God who raises the dead.

I am thankful that the current elders of Immanuel did not succumb to the men who opposed the plain words of Jesus. They extended the bread and the cup of forgiveness to David, Ben, Keith, and Jared. They have led the way in practicing the gospel of the risen Christ along with the Immanuel Church.

Others of us who have tasted the joy of forgiveness and grace in the course of these events over the last few years find ourselves singing with the Psalmist "All our springs are found in you." We welcome you to experience the same joy. We have been refreshed by the fresh springs of the gospel of our Lord Jesus. We will gladly fellowship with all those who publicly forgive. So, jump on into the joy of forgiveness. You will not be disappointed by our risen Savior, Jesus!

In Christ,  
James Faris  
June 2023