

12/08/05

John Austin
2556 Calima Drive
Abingdon, VA 24210

Pastor R.C. Sproul, Jr. and the Session of:
St. Peter Presbyterian Church
PO Box 158
Mendota, Virginia 24270

Dear R.C. Sproul, Jr.,

Thank you, R.C, for your undated personal letter of repentance, which we received 12/07/05, yesterday. Unfortunately, I cannot thank the Session for the separate, and also undated, letter of "repentance," signed by all members of the session (yourself included, R.C.), also received yesterday. Using the word "repentance" repeatedly in a letter does not, of itself, constitute repentance. There should also be some evidence of repentance, of which there still is none. As an example, repentance means that you stop sinning, and that you stop sinning immediately. We are still being shunned, right up to this very day.

Effectively, what you have done, R.C., is to offer "repentance" with the one letter, and then withdraw it with the other. With the former you clearly and, with only minor equivocation, offered what appears to be a sincere expression of repentance. However, the latter letter is replete with equivocations, excuses, self-justifications, denials, and even some new accusations against us.

We can only interpret your latter letter as a withdrawal of any sincere offer of repentance contained in the former. At the very least, it is clear that, should the former letter actually be in any way sincere, the latter letter, signed by the entire session, makes it apparent that the other members of the session are in no way genuinely repentant, and continue to seek excuses to justify themselves. Such "repentance" is no repentance at all.

Please understand that the entire Austin family forgave you some months ago. We forgave you because this is what the Royal Law compels us to do.

Nevertheless, we were hopeful that you would be desirous of bringing closure to this months-long tragic saga of ecclesiastical tyranny, and this a tyranny that has not only brought us much grief and sorrow, but also brought much grief and sorrow to the lives of many other families in your own congregation. Instead of tangibly demonstrating contrition for your sins, it would seem that your primary objective remains the protection of your own personal interests through self-justification.

Let me respond, point by point, to the list of seven items that the session has offered its alleged “repentance” for, and explain why I must question the legitimacy of your “repentance”:

1. While I agree that your evasion of administering the proper membership vows pursuant to the RPCGA BCO, and that your sneaky substitution of your own fabricated church vows “caused confusion,” you’re not at all clear about who was confused. If you’re trying to infer that I was the one who was confused, you are wrong. At no time was I confused about the doctrine of vow-taking or of the doctrine of church membership. However, it would seem that you and your session remain quite confused on these subjects. Contrary to your theories about church membership, no one needs your permission to depart St. Peter Presbyterian Church. While seeking such permission might be the polite and respectful thing to do, it is in no way mandatory. As such, you cannot force, demand, coerce, or threaten anyone to present themselves before your session to seek your permission to leave and join another church. As you know, I have always been willing to talk with you or any other member of the session as a fellow Christian. But you would not allow this. What I was unwilling to do, was to come before the session, submit and repent of sins you ascribed to me, which cannot be found in scripture. Since I was shunned at your order to the members, I had no way of discussing these things, unless I left the future of my family up to you. As things continued in a bad direction, I believe that leaving things up to you would have been very unwise.

2. Your statement of “repentance” in this section is so vague and unspecific that it’s not possible for me, or anyone else, to understand what sin or sins you’re repenting of.

3. You are making a false assumption regarding any alleged “root of bitterness” that “we embittered you to.” At no time have we been bitter. Indeed, we long ago determined that we must forgive you, and forgive the many members of Saint Peter Presbyterian Church, who were complicit in your shun order against my family. Bitterness is self-destructive. We have taught our children that we need to be forgiving and loving regardless of how we are treated, but that does not mean that those who sin against us are not sinning.

4. I find it astonishing that you would now claim that, “We never desired to keep you here against your will.” How else could I interpret your actions other than you were refusing to permit me to leave? You demanded that I submit to your autocratic rule, with no reservations, and no defense afforded me of any kind. Anything less than passive obedience you characterized as “contumacy.” If I would agree to your terms of *unconditional surrender*, you then asserted that, “It could take a few years before we would determine if we are prepared to release you to another church.” And you characterize that as not wanting “to keep you here against your will”?

“We only desired to do things decently, and in good order,” is yet another one of your shocking statements. It was I who did things decently and in good order. I informed you, in writing of my intentions to leave St. Peter Presbyterian Church, why I had no choice but to leave for the sake of obedience to Christ and the sake of not violating my own conscience, and the fact that I was leaving in order to maintain peace with the body. Never was I or my family divisive in this. We truly wanted to leave quietly in peace, and

you would not allow it. Rather than permitting me to leave decently and in good order, you unjustly and maliciously “disciplined” not only me, but my entire family, including my five children. You have sown discord among the brethren, brought confusion into the assembly, destroyed our friendships, and threatened other St. Peter members with “discipline” should they have any contact with us. Functioning “decently and in order” is predicated upon obedience to the dictates of Scripture. How can you claim that you were functioning decently and in order, or that you even *intended* to function decently and in good order, when you trampled underfoot the biblical dictates of church discipline (Mat. 18:15-17), and violated our constitutional rights guaranteed to us per the RPCGA BCO?

“We only desired that you meet with us as a session. . .” is much like your other duplicitous statements. At no time did you express any such “desire.” Rather, all you communicated were demands, ultimatums and threats. As I stated to Mr. Barfield when I called him, I was always willing to meet with any of you as a brother in Christ.

Portraying yourselves as benevolent in the manner in which you have transferred “the nine families that have left our church previously has born out that we are not restrictive in our transfers” demonstrates that either you are self-deluded or duplicitous. Written testimonies of some of those former members, being submitted in coming weeks to Presbytery, will prove that not only have you been “restrictive,” but threatening and intimidating. The fact that you shunned my family, without any due process, is proof positive that your claims that “we are not restrictive” is not only ludicrous, but even evidence of cultish behavior.

“...you refused to meet with us” is true, and that refusal came only after you, R.C., attacked me and claimed that I was saying, “Shannon is going to hell,” merely because I challenged your theory of “presumptive regeneration” by baptism. I have never claimed that your daughter would go to hell, quite the contrary. You then followed up, in short order, with an ultimatum (not a “request”) that I present myself before your inquisition to answer your charges of alleged “vow-breaking.” You had already proved to me that none of the session were acting in love as shepherds in any way visible to me. You were unfair and presumptive in your judgments against me, backing me in a corner with no way out. It would have been very foolish for me to allow you to usurp my God-given authority to make decisions for my own family and to submit to your session which was clearly going outside of the Bible, and your own denominational constitution.

“...even refusing to accept delivery of letters sent to you” is yet another blatant misrepresentation of the facts. First of all, “letters” is plural. I only know of one letter sent by you that I failed to pick up. Secondly, I have never “refused” even one letter, let alone multiple letters. Rather than “refusing” mail, I did not make a special trip to the post office to pick up your certified letter, after receiving the other letters that you mailed to me. Certified letters which are not signed for promptly are returned to sender. I never “refused” your Certified letter, and I doubt that you and your entire session are unaware of Certified mail procedures.

5. “We repent of misinterpreting the BCO... This was unintentional.” I’m astonished by such an admission. If this were true it demonstrates an extraordinary degree of incompetence. Such incompetence would run completely contrary to the skills and

mental faculties possessed by any man who carries the title, "Dr." This just doesn't add up. If, in fact, you and your session are so incompetent that you are incapable of reading and properly interpreting the RPCGA BCO, it would seem to me that you are unfit to govern a church. I don't have the title "Dr." and, once I read the BCO, I didn't have any trouble at all understanding it. As such, I have to wonder if you'd actually ever read the BCO at all, prior to exercising your "discipline" against me and my entire family. If that were the case, how could you then claim that you had any regard for the vow that you took to obey it?

As to your assertions that you were "unaware" of certain rules, such as the Presbytery's "motion for erasure," this only further demonstrates your reckless disregard for "doing things properly and in good order." Issuing an order to shun an entire family is no minor disciplinary matter. Why did you fail to first contact the Moderator or Stated Clerk of Presbytery and seek their counsel? Not only were you "not thorough in our research," you never bothered to research anything at all. Could it be that you deliberately evaded "research"? Your only choices are to acknowledge either an extraordinary level of incompetence, or a deliberate evasion of consulting Presbytery because you already knew your actions were unjustifiable. In either case, you would render yourselves disqualified from the office of Elder.

6. "We repent of the hurt that has been caused by our request to our membership to refrain from contact with your family" is the most problematic statement in your entire letter evidencing your propensity for blame-shifting. In all other cases in your letter you shift the blame on me; but in this statement you blame your own congregation! If your censure of my family, including "The refraining from all contact with your family by the other families in our church" (as you read to the heads of household this past May), were a mere "request," rather than an order, directive or mandate, it would demonstrate the worst of character, and a true mob mentality, on the part of the entire St. Peter congregation. However, we think better of St. Peter members than to believe your blame-shifting. We know from multiple testimonies given us by St. Peter members that your order to shun us was no mere "request." We also know that you threatened to "discipline" anyone who might violate your shunning mandate.

"This was not meant to be a punishment against your family" is just more duplicity. The order to shun my family was issued as part of your May 14 "articles of censure" for "contumacy." Are you now actually going to allege that I wasn't under your "discipline"? Is not discipline "punishment"? Your back-peddling on this matter is just astonishing.

7. Your "efforts to be as clear as possible" were probably a lot more clear than you subsequently wished you had made them. The order you issued my family couldn't have been more clear: "The refraining from all contact with your family by the other families in our church." Yet, since that original shun order was issued, you prevaricated on the matter repeatedly. There has been a long pattern of denials and subterfuge during this entire process of our "discipline" by the St. Peter session. I don't perceive this as "confusion" but, rather, back-peddling when various St. Peter members started asking pointed questions about the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of your actions.

However, I am in strong agreement with, "We wish we had taped the meetings so you could hear what was actually said." In the future, and particularly in all head of

household meetings, you need to record your meetings, and especially in any meetings where the subject of church discipline is going to be raised. In any and all future meetings in which the Austins are to be discussed (and this would certainly include this Sunday's head of household meeting), the Presbytery expects that you will make recordings, and that you will furnish copies of them to me, and to Presbytery.

In the session's so-called letter of "repentance" you repeatedly ask for forgiveness. How is one to forgive sins which are justified, equivocated, excused, and blame-shifted? I can't say as I'm at all familiar with such a practice. Nevertheless, we do forgive you. You are not forgiven because of your letter, for your letter is an utter sham.

On Monday, November 28, 2005 you called my home and left a phone message, offering your "repentance," and requesting the opportunity to meet face-to-face, at which time you would read us a prepared statement. I had good cause to be suspicious of your motives and methods, and your actions since then, including our email exchange last week, have only confirmed my suspicions.

Since that time you have directed a carefully-choreographed *play* in which each actor must read from a script. The script, however, is not a biblical script but, rather, a script prepared by yourself and for yourself. It would seem that your script is entirely in furtherance of some face-saving agenda. Is this evidence of "repentance"?

You have, ostensibly, claimed that you have "repented." Yet, where is the evidence? Having acknowledged that you have sinned on November 28, what specific steps have you taken to repent and make restitution? Even more importantly, have you even *stopped* sinning? If not, why do you continue sinning?

Your chief (but not only) sin is that you have cruelly and tyrannically ordered that each and every member of the Austin family, including my children, be shunned; this in spite of the fact that we were never afforded any biblical and constitutional due process, nor were we excommunicated, nor will we be excommunicated, nor will we even be subjected to erasure. You and your entire session acted outside lawful, biblical, and constitutional authority.

As a result of your tyrannies, you have destroyed friendships and welcomed a reign of fear within your own church. You have threatened other members that they too would be "disciplined," should they "break covenant" with the session by violating your shun order against my entire family, children included.

You and your entire session are guilty of additional sins, including lying to members about the shun order. There are multiple accounts, and even accounts just within the past week, of men who have claimed that you told them that you never specifically ordered anyone to shun us, this in spite of the fact that the written record unequivocally shows that you did order that we be shunned. Is this more evidence of your "repentance"?

As a result of your session meeting of May 14, 2005 you prepared, and each session member signed, a letter to myself. You read that letter in the head-of-household

meeting, conducted shortly after posting it to me. With respect to the issue of shunning here is, in part, what you read,

This censure involves:

1. Suspension from the sacraments.
2. The refraining from all contact with your family by the other families in our church.

Men present at that meeting have communicated to us that you even gave them details as to how they were to act if we tried to approach them in a public place. How can you now, as a session, claim that you never ordered that the Austins be shunned, when there is a written record to prove that this is exactly what you did? Are you now going to claim that, just because you never use the word “shun” that you never intended that anyone should shun my family? Are you actually going to be so duplicitous that you would now claim that “The refraining from all contact with your family by the other families in our church” doesn’t mean exactly the same thing as shunning? Perhaps so. However, such phrase parsing may suit the office of a politician, but it doesn’t suit the office of a pastor. Is this yet more evidence of your “repentance”?

Every member of St. Peter Presbyterian Church who has wanted, for any reason, to contact us, has had to first obtain the permission of the session, or contact us in secret, for fear that they might be found out and treated in the same way as my family. We have been told by some of your members that they were fearful to drive down the main road near our road in case someone living near us saw them and reported back to you that they were seen near our house.

_____ had to ask permission to do additional carpentry work for me (a request which you denied). Even Laurence Windham, an elder in Saint Peter, stated that he needed the session’s permission to contact me. _____ stated the same thing in an email response to me, and others have affirmed the same thing. Yet you now are trying to convince St. Peter members that you never issued a shun order? I’m very disappointed by your historical revisionism. Is this yet more evidence of your “repentance”?

Almost two weeks have passed since you acknowledged your sin, and your alleged “repentance” for your sins. Since the bulk of your sin is your unjustly ordering the shunning of my family, why then did you not immediately notify the congregation to stop shunning us? Why did you not promptly lift the shun order? We pass various St. Peter members at the grocery store, post office, and elsewhere. To this very day we are being shunned. We wave and say hello, but we are ignored; and why should they not shun us and continue to shun us, when the last thing they heard about how they were to treat us was, “The refraining from all contact with your family by the other families in our church”?

At what point in time will anyone actually be able to notice any signs of your “repentance”? Will it be at this Sunday’s regularly scheduled head-of-household meeting (12-11-05), some two weeks after you supposedly “repented”? In the meantime, however, you continue sinning against us every time a member of St. Peter Presbyterian Church shuns us. Your sheep are faithfully following the lead of their shepherds.

As elders and pastors I thought you already knew that “repentance” means that you stop sinning, and that you stop sinning immediately. In your cases it would seem that you believe that repentance will occur only after you’re good and ready to do it, at a time and place of your personal convenience, and after you’ve had plenty of time and opportunity to put together a good cover-story.

My prayer has been that each and every one of you men would truly, sincerely and genuine repent and that, should you continue to engage in cover-ups and carefully-scripted subterfuge for nothing more than maintaining your positions, that God would be pleased to remove you and replace you with men who are more worthy of the title “shepherd,” and who will in the love of Christ and His body gently lead their flock in the teaching of the Bible alone. The more that I observe your conduct, the more convinced I am that you are unfit continue to be pastors. I would urge you, for the sake of the health of the body of Jesus Christ, resign the pastorate.

Again I would like to state that RC's personal letter was very well written, and I had little to find in it that was not true. However, by RC signing the letter from the session which is full of error and excuses for your behavior, it seems to nullify all that was written in RC's personal letter to us.

We are still in hope that you will all repent and that we can be reconciled in Christ. Though we have been treated badly by all of you, we hold no malice towards any. As I've stated we have forgiven you, but that does not mean you are free to continue sinning, and justifying your sins. If you are really repentant, it will show in your words and your actions.

Christ's church needs to be lead in His ways, not yours or any other man's. Please prayerfully consider stepping down and do the right thing before Jesus Christ, the only High Priest and Redeemer of God's elect!

Soli Deo Gloria,

John Austin

CC: Dr. Kenneth Talbot – Moderator, Westminster Presbytery
Rev. Reed Best – Stated Clerk, Westminster Presbytery
Laurence Windham, Teaching Elder, St. Peter Presbyterian Church
Wayne Hays, Governor, St. Peter Presbyterian Church
Jay Barfield, Deacon, St. Peter Presbyterian Church