

The following statement is long. Long because, when dealing with issues of utmost importance and sensitivity, particularly within Christ's church, we must understand the issues being discussed. And that takes some time.

In the last few months, there has been quite a lot about Harvest Bible Chapel in the news, blogosphere, social media, and amongst friends. It's the most explosive, uncertain, and challenging time in Harvest's history.

Nobody wants this. We can all agree that negative public discourse about a specific person or church is rarely good. And at Harvest, God has worked, thousands have been saved, and no one wants to see a vibrant church be harmed.

I started at Harvest in 2010; I was in charge of Production and Visual Media for a few years. I then was able to concentrate on filmmaking and large-scale videos, and in my last couple years I was on the Executive Leadership Team (XLT), which is the highest leadership group in the church, consisting of about a dozen people.

I also occasionally served in various specialty roles. In fact, several years ago Harvest went through a similar public crisis. I was asked to advise James and lead a small group of leaders and friends in defending him to one of our biggest ministry partners, who was considering severing their relationship with us. Then again in 2017, Harvest had more challenges that began with James's outburst in front of the HCA high school and culminated in him severing Harvest's relationship with Harvest Bible Fellowship. I was asked to advise and supervise communication again and to potentially serve as an "advocate" for James.

I resigned at the end of 2017.

There are multiple blogs claiming that James and Harvest leadership have a longstanding pattern of the following: lack of true elder authority and accountability over James, questionable financial practices, patterns of public and private deception, and consistent and frequent outbursts of anger and verbal abuse from James that, along with the other accusations, are disqualifying.

I didn't resign because of outside voices...I actually agree that many of these voices have questionable motives and often-incorrect assumptions and nuance. They (like myself) are flawed, sinful people.

I resigned because of a disturbing reality: I'm a witness that almost everything you're reading and hearing is true.

What I'll cover in this statement:

*Why I'm coming forward*

*Isn't going public wrong?*

*Facts about what's happened at Harvest*

*Avoidable disasters*

*If things are so bad, wouldn't the elders act?*

*Why speak up now?*

*What's the end game?*

#### WHY I'M COMING FORWARD

I'm not easily intimidated, but this is tough to write for a few reasons. One, I was a leader at Harvest for eight years, and I benefited a lot from being there (great opportunities, benefits, friendships, and yes, loyalty and support from Pastor James). This feels ungrateful. Two, I have good friends who are still there. Three, I've said I wouldn't do this.

And four, and most importantly, and it's the reason it's taken me this long...all four of my kids go to Harvest Christian Academy. My oldest son graduates in a few months after nine years there. And there's a high likelihood this statement will get them expelled.

So I take no pleasure in this and I definitely have something to lose. But there's a caveat to my third reason—I'd said I would never do this "unless there were lies told. I will correct lies." And regarding reason number four...when we told our kids the potential consequences of speaking up, they ultimately said they wanted us to do the right thing.

#### "GOING PUBLIC IS WRONG"

Why speak up? Why go public? Isn't that "attacking the church" or "being divisive"? What right do I have

to speak out when I don't even attend Harvest Bible Chapel anymore? And why not do this privately?

The answer has become simple, and it's two-fold. One, because many employees at Harvest and more congregants are upset or confused by what's going on. They have no recourse (I'll explain why in a moment), and some have expressed that they wish someone from the outside would say something or help. And two, because James has already gone public with comments from the pulpit, comments in articles, and a lawsuit.

The notion that the issues are related to personal grievances and so they should be handled privately simply doesn't apply. For one thing, most of these issues aren't "personal grievances"—they're issues of institutional corruption, habitual deception, or abuse of others. For example, no one would say that those who spoke out about Bill Hybels harassing women were wrongly airing a personal grievance. In fact, not saying something would've been considered enabling and a betrayal of those being hurt. Furthermore, these issues HAVE been addressed privately, dozens of times, to James, leadership, and elders.

"THERE'S SO MUCH NOISE AND RUMORS, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO DISCERN"

It's true; there's been a lot of stuff tossed about publicly and privately. How do we make sense of it all? How do we know what's true? And aren't these blogs filled with untruths? Shouldn't we trust our church's leadership, especially when God is doing so many great things at Harvest? And as Pastor James said from the pulpit, "the business of the church is not the business of the church."

So I will avoid opinion or rumor and stick only to the inarguable facts.

Consider the following:

--Walk in the Word's radio/TV ministry and Harvest Bible Fellowship have been the signature initiatives of Harvest for years. Millions of dollars were raised to expand those ministries. James repeatedly called planting churches the single most important ministry Harvest has ever undertaken.

In the last year and a half, James has eliminated both Harvest Bible Fellowship and radio/TV.

--Around two years ago, the XLT consisted of Dean Butters, Luke MacDonald, Kent Shaw, Garrett Higbee, Bill Molinari, Scott Milholland, Janine Nelson, Fred Adams, Trei Tatum, Jeff Donaldson, Rick Donald, and myself. These were the highest leaders of the organization, the top advisors and decision-makers, the men and women closest to Pastor James and all of what happens at Harvest.

75% of them are gone.

--James has been publicly accused of a pattern of angry and abusive behavior; questionable financial practices; public and private lies or deceptions; and a lack of true submission to elder authority. Basically, he's being accused of being unqualified to be a pastor. But as of this moment, the vast majority of James's closest friends and ministry leaders over the decades have said nothing publicly about these crises. Because of personal reasons or signed agreements, they're restricted from saying anything negative.

There are, however, zero restrictions on saying something positive.

How many, outside his current employees and elders, are coming forward to say any of these extreme charges are false? Their silence is more telling than anything I could say.

--James recently said in an article, "I do not have a problem with anger." His oft description of this issue that has been raised for years is that he struggles with being "too intense."

We in XLT have personally witnessed, heard about, or experienced literally hundreds of incidents of verbal abuse of men and women, ranging from vitriolic texts to outright yelling that could be heard down hallways. We have all counseled or comforted people in tears after being yelled at, many so shaken they could barely talk. Many of these encounters have happened in front of others, in hallways, etc..

--"I've never been spoken to that way in my life." Referring to rage-filled encounters with James, we in XLT have heard that specific phrase from countless individuals, including employees, volunteers, vendors, business owners, service staff, police officers, etc. These stories have come from all over the country. Conservatively speaking, Harvest Bible Chapel has lost dozens of partners, vendor relationships, or church members because of these encounters.

--We have heard vulgarity in anger many times.

--Some of us have children who came home from school in February of 2017 shocked and saddened by one of the worst outbursts of anger they'd ever witnessed—a berating by James of two students in front of the entire High School. Several students were in tears watching it, a student described spit hitting her in the front row. There was a videotaped apology, and a year later, an in-person apology. But the public promise by James to teach the class for the Semester was never kept, the schedule that had been completely upended

to accommodate his teaching never fixed, and an apology for breaking that promise was never given.

To be fair, a few elders and staff have told me they did not believe the incident was a big deal, that their children did not report it as a problem. And one of the top leaders of the church told me he wishes James wouldn't have apologized for the incident at all. However, that same person had the video of the incident erased immediately, ensuring those not in the classroom that day would never see it.

--We have all been embarrassed in restaurants or stores where Pastor James has chewed out service staffers. It is commonly known and often discussed that when you go to a restaurant with him, you're fearful of an incident.

--Multiple pastors in Harvest Bible Fellowship were planning to write a letter expressing their lack of trust in James's authority and his qualifications as a pastor. To prevent that letter from going public, James resigned from the Fellowship and withdrew Harvest from it. He refused elder attempts to show them his resignation letter before sending it. Then in a sermon months later, he told the church he severed the relationship with HBF because Harvest needed to shift its focus from church planting to supporting larger churches that plant.

--We have witnessed James outright reject the wishes or directives of the Executive Committee (EC) of Elders. On one occasion in particular, the EC called a private meeting at Camp Harvest with the intention to outline a health and counseling plan for Pastor James moving forward, after he withdrew Harvest from the Fellowship without permission or approval. James refused to meet with the EC without the presence of his leadership team. And at that meeting, James told the EC "I don't trust you," accused them of being weakly influenced by outside critics, and outright refused their attempts to participate in or even speak into his counseling plan. He then re-shaped the leadership structure of the church, including placing himself on the Executive Committee of the elders. Incidentally, Harvest elder by-laws state the Pastor cannot be removed without a unanimous vote of the executive committee of elders.

He has since apologized for his behavior in the meeting, but the consequences and decisions handed down were not adjusted. I resigned after that meeting.

--In 2017, James gave \$50,000 to a new church Mark Driscoll was planting after his entire ministry had collapsed due to issues of anger and volatile leadership. This money came from fundraising that was separate from Harvest, nearly all intended for Fellowship church planting. When some of the men who'd donated funds expressed shock and horror at the gift given outside of the Fellowship with no permission or accountability, James repaid the gift with HBC money. James has a yearly six-figure fund set aside for the purpose of giving money at his discretion (at least that was the case during my time at Harvest).

--This statement is still currently posted on Harvest's website from a 2014 update: *In recent months, Pastor James has, of his own accord, made several personal lifestyle adjustments. With ELT support, he has made these decisions to put to rest any remaining concern about his priorities. Personal sacrifices, which the MacDonalds deem small for the sake of Christ, include downsizing to a smaller home in Elgin, initiating a significant salary reduction (although unnecessary according to ECFA standards), and considering congregational norms in lifestyle decisions, such as the car they drive and how they vacation. The Elders appreciate these public confirmations of where we have always believed their heart to be. The ELT is praying that the MacDonalds' willingness to subordinate their liberty in Christ for the sake of the gospel will become a hallmark of this church and for each of us.*

A little over a year after that statement, James built and purchased a 6,000+ sq ft home and six-figure truck.

As many others have also said, I couldn't care less about what house or car James owns. He's earned his money, and when he first committed to downsizing, I told him not to do it, that he didn't need to. But has the above statement been addressed now that it no longer applies? Do the elders still "appreciate these public confirmations of where we have always believed their heart to be. The ELT is praying that the MacDonalds' willingness to subordinate their liberty in Christ for the sake of the gospel will become a hallmark of this church and for each of us."?

## AVOIDABLE DISASTERS

Think for a moment of all the big decisions made at Harvest that turned out to create massive problems of all kinds. The decisions were made rapidly, and all of the problems were warned about or very predictable. This should create serious concern.

- High school incident – multiple leaders told James his public commitment to teach the high school Bible class was a bad idea (an awful statement to make—it should have been exciting), because several of us predicted it wouldn't last and the promise would be broken.
- Elder video – Several years ago key elders read a statement on camera ex-communicating three former elders from the church, calling their actions "Satanic." James introduced the video by saying the "elders speak for God." Several of us immediately said it was a major mistake—I was yelled at by a current lead pastor for "trying to make us feel bad about it." A year later, James apologized for it, but the immense damage had been done.

- The resignation from the Fellowship – all of us were caught off guard. NONE of us leaders saw the resignation letter until it was sent (James refused an executive elder's request to see it). We all immediately knew it would be a disaster and would cause tremendous pain. James later said publicly he was shocked by the response.
- The lawsuit – When James, elders, and leadership decided to file the lawsuit, dozens of us reacted with shock. We all knew it would be a disaster for James personally, because it would bring to light so many things that would humiliate and expose him. After much money spent, pain inflicted, and awful publicity, Harvest dropped the lawsuit, citing exactly what we predicted – too much private information was being released. The obvious question should be: "Why didn't you see this coming?"

Also think of the millions of dollars raised and spent, the countless hours and resources devoted to ministries and initiatives that James ultimately abruptly dropped because of a desire to avoid personal criticism. Harvest Bible Fellowship, The Elephant Room, the radio and TV ministries...all initiatives that were sold as important and impactful and having eternal value, suddenly dropped not for kingdom reasons or because they were failing, but to avoid personal criticism.

#### WHAT ABOUT THE ELDERS? IF THINGS WERE THAT BAD, THEY WOULD ACT

Things are that bad, and among the many examples of incredible inaction I could give, here's one:

When I resigned, I made a verbal agreement with Harvest leadership that even though my reasons for leaving were negative, I wouldn't share them publicly—but Harvest would also not give inaccurate reasons for my leaving.

After wholly inaccurate reasons for my resignation were given both to the staff and then publicly on the Harvest website, I called an elder and expressed my frustration. He encouraged me to not make an issue of it; to protect my family by leaving quietly, to only speak up if Harvest lied about or did something harmful to one of my friends.

A few weeks later, I texted him about how so many leaders had left, but their real reasons were being hidden from the elders and the congregation. I said the elders should at least pursue answers. He said, "If elders are lied to or don't get all the facts, that is not on them. It is on the staff. If staff are leaving for reasons other than what we are being told, then we need to be informed of that by someone."

I pressed, saying staff shouldn't be expected to go above their bosses to the elders to complain with no fear of reprisal (especially because James is an elder). At the same time, I told him I was doing exactly what he was counseling, telling him that what was being said about me was inaccurate, and I reminded him of the details he (and the executive committee) already knew about other staff who'd left.

The Camp Harvest meeting where James refused the requests of the Executive Elders came up. He said, "Only a public attack and a loss of financial success would drive change at Harvest. We lost our window of crisis after the camp...what we all lost that day was uniform agreement to elder governance as the highest governing authority in our church. That day was about James not wanting to be under elder authority and, by not speaking up to the contrary, everyone in that room tacitly agreed with him. And the choice was made. So at this point I don't see elder authority getting anything done. We had our shot."

In summary, I was one of the top leaders at Harvest. I expressed my concerns about Harvest and about James to James, to leadership, and to a key elder. I personally witnessed James reject the wishes of the Executive Committee of the elders and then place himself on that committee. What could I do?

To be clear, in the last two years, ¾ of the Executive Leadership Team have left Harvest, along with many other key staff and pastors. And as of this moment, nearly the entire elder board does not know why.

The elders have not reached out to any of the dozen I've spoken to. No one on the elder board knows the reasons the majority of key leadership has left in the last two years, except for one elder...Pastor James.

And that is why many current staff don't act or speak out. They don't have recourse. Sure, they could just leave like I and dozens and dozens of other key leaders, pastors, and staff have, but that also means having to leave a church they and their families have attended for years. And nothing changes.

#### "WHY NOT SPEAK UP EARLIER?"

Many of us former leaders are talking amongst ourselves and feeling guilty. We feel guilty we were part of the system, and that many times we enabled behavior we now deem unrighteous and disqualifying. We feel guilty we stayed as long as we did. We also question whether or not leaving quietly was the right thing. We thought it was at the time. Aren't you supposed to keep the peace and not bring any negative attention?

For some, non-disclosure agreements are in place as a condition of severance pay. Many are concerned that speaking out would result in their families being dragged into the mess. And many of us wanted to avoid

what we'd seen in leadership meetings over and over, where those who'd left were mocked, insulted, or had their reasons for leaving twisted. The over-arching idea being that it's better for your reputation and easier for everyone to just leave quietly. And it is.

Why did we even stay as long as we did? Some of it had to do with hope; that growth would come and the private apologies might lead to change. Part of it was the belief there was more good than bad, that some of the problems were just by-products of all the obvious strengths.

But we continue to see people being hurt, entire tithe-funded ministries being shut down because of criticism, and public statements being made that defy logic or accuracy. And we think, "Could I have done more to stop this?"

It's true that I'm hurting some of the people I care about by speaking up. But I now know that if I don't try to do something, I bear responsibility for hurting even more people.

## SO WHAT'S THE END GAME?

This question comes up a lot...to bloggers, to anyone who speaks out. "What are you trying to achieve? What do you want?"

I can only speak for myself:

--Right now many people are disturbed but don't have an outlet. Many people are working in departments or ministries that have been or could be shut down at any moment. I want to speak up for them in whatever small way I can.

--I have spoken to a number of people, including students, who have actually questioned their faith or been deeply wounded, needing months to heal, because of what they've seen or personally experienced from Pastor James. I want future damage stopped.

--I want to see Harvest not only survive, but flourish for decades to come. I hope people who want to stay at Harvest will express their concerns en masse and demand change at the top.

## IN CLOSING

Recently the elders publicly pledged "unconditional support" to James. That means, obviously, "support without condition." Yet, Scripture is very clear that there ARE in fact conditions of pastoring that, if not met, should NOT be supported.

Titus and Timothy specify, among other things, these conditions: "For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered but self-controlled, disciplined, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome." Paul spends more time on those traits than anything else.

If you are currently at Harvest, you're being told these "attacks" on your pastor and church are coming from disgruntled former leaders from awhile ago. And the attacks are being described as false or already repented of. When I was at Harvest, I saw James repeatedly tell elders and staff and congregants their concerns were the result of an "unguarded heart" swayed by outside voices.

**So don't be swayed by me. Show this to an elder and simply ask, "What in this statement is untrue?"**

If they tell you I'm being generally false, ask them where specifically, or if they say, "We don't respond to outside attacks, we cover it all in love," then of course it's up to you whether or not to agree. And if they say "I don't know," or they can't point to anything I've said that's untrue, then you might consider demanding they get the answer.

Regardless, I believe if truth is absent, then those of us who know the truth have an obligation to tell it. But I also hope for restoration of Harvest as a place biblically led, both on stage AND behind the scenes (the "business of the church," per se). And I'm praying to that end, whatever it may look like and whenever it may come. I've experienced God's redeeming power in my own life and heart—His extraordinary and limitless grace that breaks us down and corrects us first, then faithfully and beautifully puts us back together, making us more like Him and glorifying Himself in the process. That is the gospel we preach.

"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Matthew 18:15-17