

Shepherding Committee of the Sparta RPC Session

February 20, 2025

Shepherding Committee Report for Sparta RPC

On **November 20, 2023**, the AIC appointed a Shepherding Committee for the Sparta RPC session "to provide counsel regarding the operations and relationships within the Sparta RPC session."

On May 30, 2024, our committee reported on our progress by outlining both short-term and long-term goals. We advised the Sparta session to reach out to the Vital Churches Committee for a strategic and actionable plan to enhance congregational vision, spiritual care, and development. Additionally, we aimed to address conflict resolution in critical areas of disagreement between Pastor Ross Fearing and Elder James Odom. Finally, we requested that the AIC appoint a provisional elder to strengthen the session.

In **July**, we identified their first major area of division: Sabbath Day responsibilities. Our discussion focused on:

1. What tasks need to be accomplished on the Lord's Day,
2. What each elder is responsible for performing, and
3. What steps should be followed if an elder cannot fulfill his duties.

After initial written communication on these questions, we met in **August** for a productive and unifying discussion. Following the meeting, we posed three follow-up questions, to which only Elder Bill Wilson responded right away:

1. What was helpful or unexpected in the meeting tonight?
2. What did you want us to talk about that we missed?
3. What topic would you like to discuss next? (With the understanding that we were not promising to take up every suggested topic.)

In **September**, Ross wrote a theological paper addressing one of the divisive issues between him and Mr. Odom. He submitted it to the session and requested approval for its submission to the Presbytery. However, Shawn reached out to Ross to discuss how this action bypassed the agreed-upon conflict resolution plan. Ross agreed.

On **October 1**, during our next joint meeting, Ross withdrew his paper. He then highlighted what he perceived as the larger issue within Sparta RPC: that several members (11 in total) had offenses against James Odom. He stated that he had encouraged these members to communicate with James and vice versa. However, he expressed that his main conflicts with James arose from addressing the offenses of these members. James objected to Ross reframing their dispute as a broader congregational issue rather than a personal conflict between the two of them. Elder Bill Wilson provided examples of James' public behavior, prompting James to become self-reflective and even apologize to Bill and Ross for a particular incident. We clarified that our scope was "to provide counsel regarding the operations and relationships within the Sparta RPC session." We were not authorized to investigate complaints within the congregation, but we endeavored to offer advice as brothers.

On **October 4**, we met again and outlined several potential paths forward for both James and Ross individually, as well as for the session as a whole. James and Ross mutually agreed that it would be beneficial to conduct a performance review within the congregation to see if any of the alleged offenses naturally emerged through that process. We provided a sample review for them to modify as they deemed appropriate.

From James's perspective, the conflict remained a personal dispute between him and Ross, similar to the "sharp disagreement" seen between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36-41. On **October 22**, James formally requested to be dismissed in order to unite with another true branch of the visible Church, Mustard Seed Church of Mascoutah, Illinois. The Sparta session informed our committee that they planned to discuss and decide on this request on Saturday, **October 26**. That day, they officially dismissed the Odoms as requested.

Conclusion

Our committee was tasked with providing counsel regarding the operations and relationships within the Sparta RPC session, and we sought to do so in a manner that was impartial, constructive, and faithful to our mandate. While the process revealed underlying tensions and differing perspectives on leadership and shepherding, it also facilitated important conversations and efforts toward resolution.

Ultimately, the situation resulted in James Odom's decision to seek membership elsewhere, which the session honored. While this outcome was not the original goal of our work, it does mark a definitive resolution to a long-standing conflict. We pray for the continued health and unity of Sparta RPC, for Ross and Bill as they continue in leadership, and for James and his family as they transition to a new church home. May the Lord use these challenges to refine His church and bring about greater peace and faithfulness in all involved.

Recommendation:

1. That our committee be dismissed.

Grace and Peace,

Shawn Anderson, Russ Pulliam, and Jon Sturm