

Steven Rhoda Judicial Committee

Fathers and brothers,

The Rhoda judicial committee of the day was charged with a twofold task of investigation and recommendation: (1) “to investigate the severity of the circumstances surrounding Reverend Stephen Rhoda’s resignation” in view of “his excessive drunkenness, hospitalization and marital problems” and (2) report back at this meeting of Presbytery whether formal charges should be brought against him and any recommendations regarding his ministerial standing in light of the qualifications from 1Tim.3:2-4 and Titus 1:6-7.” Our report is as follows:

1. Investigation: The Severity of the Case

Conscious of the limitations of “investigating” such a complex and sensitive matter as a day committee, we interviewed representatives of the Rhoda-Terre Haute Shepherding Committee (Ken de Jong) and the Terre Haute RPC session (Josh Reshey) to acquaint us with “the severity of the circumstances” – but also with the positive subsequent developments. In the interests of ensuring a pastoral context for our judicial report, we requested that the court hear first the report of the Terre Haute shepherding committee.

The gravity of Mr Rhoda’s sin having already been summarized in the Shepherding Committee report, and confirmed by our interviews with the counseling parties, we judge this case to be one of *fama clamosa*, i.e., “a public report ... that is widespread, persistent, commonly known, and has the appearance of credibility” (BD II.1.4 [E-9]). The “public report” of Mr. Rhoda’s sins and their consequences may be summarized as follows:

- A pattern of “immoderate use of drink” (WLC 136, (B-28]) leading to “enslavement to alcohol” (RPT 26.5 [A-92]) in breach of the sixth commandment, necessitating hospitalization and counseling.
- Consequent conflict with his family (though no abuse is reported), leading to the present separation from his wife.
- Though never obviously intoxicated in the course of his public ministry, the physical and mental impacts of his addiction were clearly manifest to the congregation on several occasions in the course of his public ministrations on the Lord’s Day.

2. Recommendation: Formal charges and ministerial standing

A disciplinary step already initiated by the session is the request that he resign forthwith. Mr. Rhoda has complied with this request, and his letter of resignation is included on page 32 of the AIC report. While at that time strongly expressing his desire to avoid any disciplinary actions (“hopefully without charges”), we are given to understand that this letter (dated January 10) is not a fair reflection of his current state of mind and repentance.

Because the facts of the case are beyond dispute and in view of the positive recent response to the shepherding care of the session and presbytery, we do not recommend the erection of a new judicial commission- to pursue further investigative steps, which have been satisfactorily completed by the Shepherding Committee.

Nevertheless, these sins – especially given their public and scandalous nature – are inconsistent with the Biblical requirement of I Timothy 3:2-4, 7 that, “A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behavior ... Not given to wine ... One that rules well his own house... Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall under reproach and the snare of the devil,” and Titus 1:7, “For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God; not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine... sober-minded, self-controlled.”

The sad facts of Mr. Rhoda’s sins are not disputed by his session, his family, his congregation, or himself. While we give thanks for evidence of repentance and initial steps towards reconciliation with the aggrieved parties, we submit that Mr. Rhoda’s good standing as an ordained teaching elder of this presbytery has been grievously compromised and necessitates the disciplinary action of this court.

“If the sinner confesses and repents, there must be forgiveness and reconciliation, and the matter shall be closed. You have won your brother. *Such closure may include counsel or censure appropriate to the circumstances*” (BD I.3.3 [E-4]). While positive steps towards “forgiveness and reconciliation” are currently underway, and “counsel ... appropriate to the circumstances” will continue under the oversight of the Shepherding Committee, *we nevertheless believe that the grievous public nature of Mr. Rhoda’s sins as a minister of the Gospel are circumstances that call for the censure of suspension*, delimited, per the Book of Discipline, to “the temporary exclusion ... from the exercise of ordained office... This becomes necessary when members are guilty of gross sin...” (BD I.4.1.c [E-5]). (Due to Mr Rhoda’s sincere cooperation with his session and the Shepherding Committee, we do not recommend his suspension to include “the privileges of church membership, including participation in the sacraments.” Cf. Form 30, “Suspension of an Officer” [H-23])

We are reminded that the purposes of church discipline are manifold and redemptive: “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” (BD I.1.3 [E-3]). To withhold discipline would thus deprive Mr. Rhoda of the proper grounds of his restoration, deprive Christ’s flock of its warning, peace, purity, and Gospel blessing, and deprive the Lord of His honor.

Our prayer for Mr. Rhoda is that his suspension would indeed prove “a *temporary* exclusion ... from the exercise of ordained office,” knowing that, “The lifting of suspension depends on evidence of repentance” (BD I.4.2.c [E-5]). We continue to pray that the Lord will bless the ongoing pastoral efforts of the Rhoda-Terre Haute Shepherding Committee” to that end.

Recommendations:

1. That presbytery enter executive session for the duration of deliberation on this report.
2. That presbytery issue the censure of suspension upon Mr. Steve Rhoda from the exercise of ordained office (BD I.4.1.c [E-5]). “This censure shall be pronounced by the moderator in constituted court, and in the name of Jesus Christ. The court shall also make the people under its oversight aware publicly of the fact of and reason for the suspension.” (BD I.4.1.c [E-5]).
3. That this committee be dismissed.

Respectfully submitted,

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Dave Schisler

David Whitla (chr)