Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Elephant in the Elephant Room
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One of the more recent entries to the conservative Christian conference line-up is the Elephant Room, the brainchild of James MacDonald. The idea was to bring Christian leaders together for some brotherly sparring over “elephant-in-the-room” issues. Pleased with the results of the first conference in March 2011, they’re prepared for the second in January 2012. This Elephant Room “Round 2” is being promoted like a prize fight: “Your ringside seat awaits,” and “You know the rules…No wavering. No Sidestepping. No excuses.”

MacDonald recently lit up the blogosphere when he invited T.D. Jakes to join ER2. Does he *really* intend to extend the boundaries of Christian brotherhood to a well-known anti-Trinitarian modalist, prosperity preacher? MacDonald received a fair bit of well-deserved criticism and, rather than rethinking his decision, he dug in his heels and defended it. He doesn’t think Jakes is still a modalist. Jakes is still a’ comin’ to ER2.

(Stir up a little controversy, you get instant publicity and free promotion. You gotta admit, it’s kinda clever.)

I’ve very much appreciated the thoughtful criticisms posted by **Thabiti Anyabwile**, **Carl Trueman**, and **Phil Johnson**. At some point, you should read those posts; they are instructive on many levels.

But I’d like to go back to Round 1 of the Elephant Room and **the video Mark Driscoll posted on his website**. That particular session was about the place of culture in the church, specifically asking whether or not it was a good idea for Perry Noble to open his 2010 Easter service with AC/DC’s blasphemous song, “Highway to Hell.” (No, I’m not kidding.) Evidently, that’s how Perry and his peeps “engage the culture.”

When pressed, Noble justified his decision with an overt and unashamed appeal to pragmatism:

We had a guy come up to us several months later, and he had received Christ, and he said *in that song* is where he felt God speak to him and tell him, “That’s the highway you’re on.” And so, people have asked, “Does the end justify the means?” I don’t know, ask that guy in heaven. I think he’s probably gonna say yes.

To their credit, MacDonald and others felt Noble had gone too far in engaging the culture. As MacDonald voiced his disagreement, Noble claimed biblical precedent for what he did:

What do you do in Acts chapter 17 when Paul quotes two, quote, secular rock songs when he's reaching the Athenians? What do you do in Matthew chapter 2 when God uses *astrology* [he probably meant *astronomy*, right?] to reach the wise men? I mean, how can we say those methods were not effective? … God meets people where they are and brings them to where He is. That's why we do what we do.

(Let's set aside Noble's sophomoric understanding of Acts 17 and Matthew 2 for a moment.) MacDonald was undaunted in his criticism, recognizing the clear contradiction of "taking something that is blatantly offensive to the gospel and the cross, and bringing it into the center of the church." Spot on and well said.

And then Noble asked MacDonald a critically important question: "Does God's Word directly contradict what we did?"

That was a good question. In fact, that is *the* question we should all ask about our life and ministry. What does the Bible say? Would God approve or condemn what I think, say, and do? At the end of the day, that's all that matters. God is the final authority, only His opinion matters.

But Noble didn't get a direct, clear-cut answer. In fact, the message loud and clear was "we can agree to disagree on this." Some of the men expressed strong disagreement—opinions I agree with completely. But, unfortunately, MacDonald just as strongly affirmed Noble's prerogative to do what he did without fear of condemnation. That was less than helpful.

We have Mark Driscoll to thank for not letting it go. He brought it up again, and in a way MacDonald couldn't avoid (remember, no sidestepping!). He asked, "Do *you* think it was a sin against God."

Just to remind you, Noble played a song that scoffs at divine judgment and revels in rebellion in the worship service of a church that purportedly belongs to Jesus Christ. Not only does he say God used it, but God approved of them doing it.

At the end of the day, the church leaders in the room were clearly reticent to say what Perry Noble did was sinful. In fact, at 42:51, James MacDonald summed it up by saying, "I definitely don't think it was sinful for him to do it."

Look, I'm no one special, but I just can't let that go. That's terribly misleading to allow people to come away from that video believing what you do in a worship service is simply a matter of preference. There *are* preference issues, but we can never think they don't matter in the eyes of Christ, the sovereign head of the church.

James MacDonald has positioned himself as a mentor to these younger pastors. Two of them asked the senior pastor in the room, “Was that wrong? Was that sinful?” Love demands a better answer than they received. Mentoring them demands speaking the *truth*, not your opinion, in love.

I’ll go on record as saying I think what Perry Noble did *was* a sin. It doesn’t have to do with his motives (God knows and judges motives, not me; 1 Cor. 4:5). It has to do with what he *did*, what he intentionally planned and performed in a worship service.

As long as Noble calls his gathering of people a *church*, he’s professing it to be an assembly of the saints of God, a gathering of God’s people who come to exalt the holy and living God by expounding His holy and living Word. Nothing unholy or unfitting belongs in that service.

On what grounds do I say it was sinful? Go back to the incident with Nadab and Abihu, Leviticus 10:1-3.

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered strange fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the LORD has said, ‘Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.’”

What was the sin of Nadab and Abihu? They offered “strange fire.” Strange, as in alien or foreign. And I think it’s intentional that the Holy Spirit didn’t get more specific in describing, delineating, or defining what was strange about it. Whatever it was—and this is the principle the Spirit intends for us—the fire was strange; it didn’t belong, it wasn’t fitting or appropriate.

Nadab and Abihu died because they made a bad judgment call in their ministry. They were innovative rather than submissive, and by so doing they publically diminished the holiness, the separateness, the otherness of God. That was sinful.

Noble committed the same sin as Nadab and Abihu. He offered strange fire in his service to the Lord. I couldn’t say it any better than MacDonald did: Noble took “something that is blatantly offensive to the gospel and the cross, and [brought] it into the center of the church.”

Has anyone else committed that sin? Certainly. None of us is without fault. But when we learn of our sin and error, it’s up to us to repent, confessing what we did as sin and striving to never do that again.

Will Noble repent? From what I saw on that video, he didn’t seem to be in a listening frame of mind; he was all about justifying himself, even bragging about his profane decision. And even if he were inclined toward repentance, I’d think it would be difficult to be confronted and find your way to a

humble and contrite spirit while several video cameras are capturing your every expression for a live audience. Perhaps that's an argument against the Elephant Room as the best venue for hammering out these kinds of issues.

That Elephant Room session was full of swagger and bravado, the epitome of hipster coolness. But the biggest elephant in the room on that day was the failure to fear God, the failure to speak with conviction when His Word is so clear.

While watching that video, I couldn't help but remember the prophetic words of David Wells in *God in the Wasteland*, that "God now rests too inconsequentially upon the church." Wells continues, saying, "If God is at the center of worship, one has to wonder why there is so much surrounding the center that is superfluous to true worship—indeed, counterproductive to it."

Whenever the clear voice of God in His Word is blunted or diminished, whether by ignorance or neglect, God will rest too inconsequentially upon the church. I fear we're becoming a generation that's doing church in a way that is counterproductive to *true* worship. And I'm concerned it's because we don't fear God as we should, and we're becoming accustomed to doing what is right in our own eyes.

"To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn" (Is. 8:20).

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