

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Herding the Elephants

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The Elephant Room is a dialogue forum invented in 2011 by emerging star Mark Driscoll, together with James MacDonald, Steven Furtick, David Platt, Matt Chandler, Greg Laurie, and Perry Noble. The stated objective is to discuss controversial doctrinal issues with “guests from all places and belief systems” with the goal of theological sharpening. David Cloud has posted an assessment of this concept [here](#) and ends his observation with this statement: **“The Elephant Room outfit is the blind leading the blind; they can’t even see the elephants!”**

*This article has been posted by Lion and Lamb Apologetics specifically for researchers! **Be a Berean***



With all the digital ink that’s been spilled surrounding **The Elephant Room 2**, it’s been difficult (and a bit wearisome!) trying to keep up with everything. I thought that I would give it my best shot to corral some of the most helpful, and some of the most telling, commentary on the whole situation into a single spot.

Because of the scope of the event, this post will be quite lengthy. Nevertheless, I hope it will be a benefit to those interested in the issues.

In Anticipation

- ☞ Pretty soon after MacDonald came out endorsing “manifestations” as classical Trinitarian language (which comments have since been revised), Carl Trueman got the ball rolling by asking, [“Is Nicene Christianity Important?”](#) Surely not a sign of good things to come.
- ☞ A few days later The Cripplegate’s own [Nathan Busenitz wrote](#) about the history of the modalist heresy and the history of Jakes’ involvement with modalism.
- ☞ [Challies followed up the next day](#) with a round-up of where the issues stood at that point. He asked poignant questions that unfortunately would have to be answered in the negative: “Will these men be willing to ask him very difficult, very nuanced, very penetrating questions? ... And I don’t mean for the other participants to ask a question that essentially says, ‘You’re not a modalist, right?’ but an honest, searching, penetrating series of questions that will address this concern head-on and will not

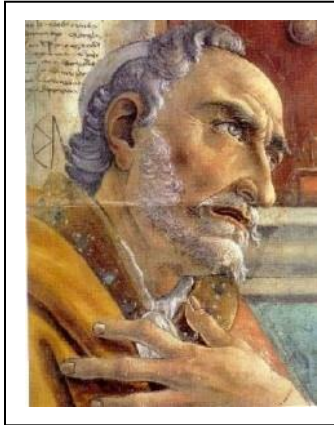
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stop until it is settled. Jakes has given us legitimate cause to be concerned, cause enough to go no further until answers are given. Until that question is settled, nothing else really matters.”

- ☞ Thabiti Anyabwile wrote an outstanding, compassionate, faithful, pastoral post [warning of the collateral damage](#) that was likely to result from MacDonald & Co. going through with an ER2 that included T.D. Jakes: “This kind of invitation undermines that long, hard battle many of us have been waging in a community often neglected by many of our peers. And because we’ve often been attempting to introduce African-American Christians to the wider Evangelical and Reformed world as an alternative to the heresy and blasphemy so commonplace in some African-American churches and on popular television outlets, the invitation of Jakes to perform in ‘our circles’ simply feels like a swift tug of the rug from beneath our feet and our efforts to bring health to a sick church. [...] This isn’t on the scale of Piper inviting Warren. This is more akin to Augustine inviting Muhammad.”



- ☞ [Carl Trueman followed up on that](#) final comment by saying, memorably: “That is actually something of an insult to Augustine, but it is legitimate rhetoric in the service of a very important point.” He also went on to comment adeptly on the incongruity of the evangelical world’s response to Jakes and their response to MacDonald’s participation with Noble and Furtick, whom, he says, “hardly seem any closer to Paul’s description of what an elder or overseer should be than the Bishop.”
- ☞ James White [took the words out of my mouth](#) when he wondered whether Phil Johnson could still be a cessationist after [his discussion with Todd Friel](#), in which he evaluates ER1 and predicts with uncanny accuracy the events that would eventually surround ER2.
- ☞ Around this time (in the middle of October) it became apparent that Mark Dever, [once listed as a speaker for ER2](#), was [not listed some time shortly after](#). Later, it became obvious that he withdrew his participation when he learned of Jakes’ invitation.
- ☞ Also around this time, D.A. Carson and Tim Keller gave an unofficial “[State of the Coalition Address](#)” to address the criticism that The Gospel Coalition was receiving internally from both sides of the issue. Because of MacDonald’s involvement with TGC, many expected them to challenge him to disinvite Jakes or suspend the ER2, while others apparently expected them to be “big-tent” and “charitable,” and provide further cover for him.

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- ✎ Not satisfied by such a statement, Phil Johnson noted that with MacDonald giving a platform to a known heretic, the Gospel Coalition was going to have to decide [which was more important: the “Gospel” or the “Coalition.”](#)
- ✎ Unfortunately, Dan Phillips’s two posts written back in November went not only unheeded by MacDonald & Co., but went as largely untapped resources even among opponents of the ER2. The first addresses [Jakes’ fitness as a Christian leader](#) from a fresh angle. The second addresses [what true repentance would have looked like](#) from an avowed modalist and prosperity preacher such as Jakes.

A little while after this, the blogosphere had tired of talks of ER2 for a while, and, for the most part, took the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays off and awaited the actual conference in late January. Besides, attention was diverted to the sideshow that was the Code Orange Revival, which, with the exception of Matt Chandler’s message, sort of felt like the step-child of the whole Elephant Room debacle.

MacDonald’s Secession

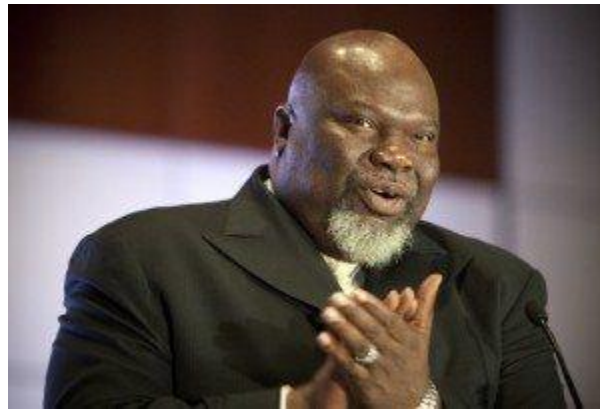
- ✎ Noise kicked back up again a day before the conference, when news broke of [James MacDonald’s secession](#) from The Gospel Coalition, insisting God had called him to distance himself from reputable scholars and pastors who have always expressed an overt fidelity to the Gospel, so that he could hang out with the likes of modalists and health-and-wealth preachers.
- ✎ Carson and Keller offered [a conciliatory response](#) (on TGC’s behalf) to MacDonald’s announcement, acknowledging that MacDonald felt “called of God” and wishing him all the best in his future endeavors.
- ✎ [Frank Turk’s response](#) to TGC’s comments was pointed: “The Gospel Coalition’s response to MacDonald’s resignation is par for the course for an organization that, frankly, values unity above the means to achieve unity (which is: sharpening each other with the truth). The dodge that they are a ‘center-bounded’ organization also needs to be checked for its shelf-life date as this kerfuffle demonstrates exactly what it means to be ‘center-bounded’—you can hang out with us as long as you don’t embarrass us, and when you do embarrass us, you just have to excuse yourself and we’ll smile and wave.”
- ✎ Also in response to TGC’s comments regarding MacDonald’s secession, [Dan Phillips drew an interesting comparison](#) between TGC’s and MacDonald’s comments and a “leaky canon:” “They do nothing but compliment their departing heretic-promoting brother, and he responds by accusing them of sinning by not agreeing with

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him. Because that is the rub, right? God ‘called’ James MacDonald to do certain things. Of this MacDonald entertains and allows no doubt. But the TGC leadership might not agree with those things. Those things that *God called him* to do. Which means *they don’t agree with God*. ... Nice, huh?”

The Conference

- ☞ Trevin Wax served the evangelical world by doing [the unenviable work of live blogging](#) the ER2, providing a transcript of the discussion about Jakes’ modalism.



- ☞ An unexpected elephant in the room, though, was Chris Rosebrough’s expulsion from the conference under [the threat of arrest](#). So much for [not “crouching behind walls of disagreement”](#) and engaging in “conversation among all kinds of leaders.”
- ☞ See here for Chris’s [interview on the issue](#).
- ☞ Trevin followed up with [a call for clarity and charity](#), for grace and truth, and for assuming the best about the motives of the men involved as we evaluate the events of the Elephant Room. We can all appreciate those calls and would do well to consider them. Unfortunately, the evaluation that followed them seemed to be a bit ambivalent. My perception was that, in striving for balance, he failed to say much of anything conclusively.

Jakes’ “Repentance”

- ☞ So, as the transcript notes, T.D. Jakes “repented” of his modalistic past and affirmed “One God, Three Persons.” Two days after the fact, Frank Turk looked particularly at how one should respond to Jakes’ comments and [whether we should accept his confession](#) as a repudiation of modalism and embrace of orthodoxy: “If he’s my brother in Christ, saying, ‘I’m on a journey,’ and ‘It’s actually too mysterious for words,’ and ‘well, I use “manifestations” when you use “persons” but we just mean

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the same darn thing,' and so on is actually the *opposite* of humility and the opposite of brotherly love: it's self-justification. It says that all errors are actually par for the course, and that I have no culpability in them. That's not Christian faith speaking: that's something else, and it's ugly. You want me to treat you like a brother (much less: a leader and teacher) in Christ? Act like it. Do what we do. Real fruitfulness is repentance whenever we do something wrong, and not justifying our mistakes in a very corny, aw-shucks way."

✎ Frankly, I don't know of many men who are more equipped to comment on the viability and orthodoxy of Jakes' confession on the Godhead than James White. Here's his response to the whole fiasco on the Dividing Line: [audio](#), [video](#).



✎ After a few days of witnessing the [uncritical acceptance](#) of Jakes' comments, James White lamented what he sees as "[The Discernment Gap](#)," noting that no such repentance from modalism and an embrace of historic Trinitarianism took place, and that there wasn't a ton of effort to make the issue clear: "Sadly, there was no follow up. Driscoll and the rest heard what they wanted to hear, fist-bumped and applauded, and all was well."

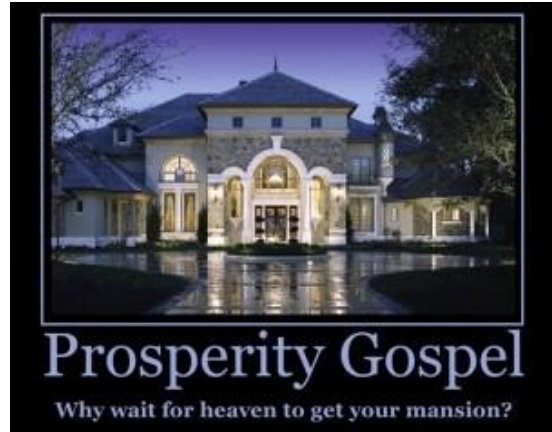
✎ [Carl Trueman also weighed in](#) from an informed perspective: "If the transcript of ER is accurate, the questions posed to Jakes never really reflected any knowledge of Trinitarian debate after the second century. ... [F]or him then to prefer 'manifestation'—a term with a lot more problematic baggage, historically and theologically, than ever 'person' has—and apparently be given a pass on that—that speaks volumes about the quality of the questioning." He goes on, "We are not dealing here with men who are simply making a credible Christian profession as church members; we are dealing with pastors who lead churches and hold terrible and awesome responsibility for protecting their flocks and making sure the truth is taught. We are also dealing with men who, through the use of conferences and internet, aspire to influence your congregation and mine."

✎ Rich Barcellos interviewed former Oneness pastor Jordan Dayoub regarding Jakes' comments. I think he offers [a valuable "inside" perspective](#): "Here's the problem. Driscoll and MacDonald let him expound on his own views and experiences and I know it was in a spirit of love. What they're unable to detect, because they're unfamiliar, is the ecumenical smokescreen that big-time prosperity preachers like Jakes put up because he really cares nothing for theology. If you listen closely, his entire discourse is centered on denominational identities and bridging the divide. He says he was Metho-Baptist-Pentecostal because of his upbringing. He sees theology

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simply as petty divisions among varying tribes of Christian sects. Because he sees himself as a ‘bridge builder’, doctrine is merely semantics among those who profess Christ. He told them he believed in ‘God in three persons’ but never called himself a Trinitarian. His position today is exactly what it was 15 years ago – vague.”

✎ Further, a point that’s been made by many is that even if Jakes *did* satisfactorily renounce modalism and embrace Trinitarianism, there’s still his prosperity gospel to reckon with. Unrelated to the ER2, the guys at 9Marks have compiled [a list of Jakes’ books](#) which pretty clearly show his commitment to health-and-wealth teaching.



✎ One wonders how to reconcile Driscoll and MacDonald’s acceptance of Jakes—even if they *do* believe he’s a Trinitarian—with their [categorical denouncement of prosperity teaching](#). (HT: [Wretched](#))

✎ Ed Stetzer lined up some [apples and oranges](#) by comparing Jakes to Apollos and MacDonald and Driscoll to Priscilla and Aquila. Apollos could be described, by divine inspiration, as “speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus” ([Acts 18:25](#)). Modalism and prosperity preaching are light years away from speaking and teaching anything concerning Jesus accurately.

✎ Tim Raymond of Credo Magazine [raised a valid point](#) about how the exaltation of such unqualified men to the status of having a leading voice in evangelicalism is damaging to the Church: “By lifting up men with minimal theological commitments as examples to pastors, the Elephant Room is proclaiming, perhaps unwittingly, that a rigorous concern for sound doctrine is not essential to the pastoral office.” It is as certain as it is unfortunate, however, that this is the case beyond just ER2.

✎ I really appreciated [the thoughtful and candid comments](#) at Paleoevangelical regarding TGC’s response to the whole ER2 mess in general: “As a pastor in a church in which members and their families have been scarred by the disastrous teaching of the prosperity gospel movement, I don’t feel particularly served when a present TGC council member and a now-resigned member prop up one of its most well-known proponents. TGC needs to clean up the mess its elephant made on our lawn. [\[We wish \[MacDonald\] well in his far-reaching endeavors\]](#) doesn’t cut it.”

Voddie’s “Repentance”

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- Amidst all that has caused the faithful follower of Christ to mourn in this debacle, [Voddie Baucham has provided a wonderful example](#) of how to faithfully respond to such a situation: “There was no way for me to 1) keep silent on this growing controversy, and 2) attend the Men’s Conference, without giving tacit approval to ER2.” If you haven’t read this brilliant post, you need to.
- James White [expressed his encouragement](#), as have many, in light of Voddie’s response: “But it is encouraging to know that there remains a stalwart core who are not easily taken in by glib phrases and weasel-words when it comes to the central elements of the faith.” James later had Voddie on the Dividing Line to discuss the “[ethnic gnosticism](#)” that has resulted from the ER2 debate.
- Our own Austin Duncan [honored his friend](#) in light of Voddie’s continued display of faithfulness and in anticipation of his coming to [Shepherds’ Conference](#) in March.

White Reformed Guys’ “Repentance”

- But some were quite irked by the rejection of Jakes’ “repentance” as legitimate. In a new brand of weird, Bryan Loritts called for repentance among “middle aged white Reformed guys.” No link on that one, because it’s been [subsequently removed](#) from the website.



- If you’d like to read the pertinent comments, though, you should check out [James White’s excellent response to Loritts](#): “It is absolutely, positively *disgusting* to me that this canard, so common from the left in political arenas, would be inserted into the discussion of Jakes’ long-time standing as a modalist. I don’t care what color the man is. It is pure distraction and absurdity to make reference to ‘middle aged white Reformed guys.’”

Oh, but it gets worse.

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- ☞ Monday brought us part one of [James MacDonald's interview](#) of Bryan Loritts, Charles Jenkins, and Eric Mason, ostensibly because James MacDonald had been “humbled” and was refusing to speak about the success of ER2.
- ☞ It should go without saying that the comments stated and sanctioned in that discussion are deeply offensive. To insist that the black voices who are critical of Jakes *must* be Uncle Toms who are idolizing white people is, frankly, disgusting. The tacit assumption that the criticism couldn't have anything to do with the gross amounts of spiritual harm that T. D. Jakes has done in the black Christian community via his modalism and prosperity preaching—[like Thabiti said was the case three months ago](#)—is just shameful.
- ☞ [Thabiti also seemed to anticipate such a move](#) a day before the Elephant Room: “I also want my non-African-American brothers to realize the harmful dynamic of pitting one African American against another. When two white brothers disagree publicly over a theological issue, there's likely not a community ‘back home’ trying to decide which brother is ‘black’ and therefore which brother to follow. Historically, some white leaders have intentionally played one African American leader against another with the aim of dividing and weakening the community. That's a history well-known and a strategy much hated in African-American communities. So, when a conflict between two African American religious leaders takes place publicly, care must be taken not to walk into this troubled narrative and trap.”
- ☞ Voddie himself actually anticipated such a move as well. [See especially #4](#) in the post previously mentioned.
- ☞ Phil Johnson responded Wednesday, [perfectly capturing the essence of the absurdity](#): “If you're an old white guy with any hint of Reformed theology in your confessional statement and you don't think T. D. Jakes's equivocations at Elephant Room 2 were sufficient to erase decades of concern about his Oneness leanings and his relentless proclamation of a false Prosperity Gospel—then you must be a racist. ... If on the other hand you are a young black man with Reformed convictions—or any black person who just has a keen interest in doctrinal and biblical accuracy—you are a sellout and a reproach to your own community.”
- ☞ Also from that post: “And why the deafening silence [btw, [don't miss this post](#)] from so many men and ministries who supposedly are committed to standing for the defense and proclamation of core gospel truths? If you can be intimidated into silence



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by the race card when a greed-mongering prosperity-gospel Sabellian-sympathizer is being hailed by once-sound evangelicals as someone to be emulated, what doctrine will you defend openly and publicly?"

If you can believe it, there's still more that could have been recorded, and surely there is more yet to be written. But Phil Johnson's closing question seems like a good place to stop and add our voices to those calling for an appropriate response from the appropriate people. Perhaps one answer we've already been given is from [Kevin DeYoung](#). I hope others follow his example.

* * * *

UPDATE: This afternoon (Feb. 3), D.A. Carson and Tim Keller published "some theological and pastoral reflection[s] on the interlocking issues with which we have been wrestling" on TGC's website. [You can read it here](#).

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