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T.D. Jakes and the Elephant Room

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Controversy customarily generates its share of purple prose. It is very easy to read everything an opponent says as negatively as possible—in *malam partem*, as the Latins say, “in a bad sense,” while taking what our friends say *in bonam partem*, “in a good sense.” Such debate tends to generate polarities—and God knows that sometimes what we most need are clear-sighted polarities. Some of these polarities, however, quickly take on the flavor of party spirit and predictable responses, without any powerful effort to encourage a meeting of minds, even where we end up in disagreement.



But controversy can also provide a teaching moment, not least because the interest of many people is focused on the disputed issues. It is hard to deny that such a moment has arrived. We would like to offer some theological reflections on six conceptual pairings. We have learned over the past few decades that clear thought about the six pairings we are about to comment on is not easy. Others may be able to improve upon our musings, or even correct them. Still, we hope that the following theological reflections will clarify at least a few issues for some people.

1. Persons and Manifestations

What is at stake in the distinction? Toward the end of the second century and right through the third century, a number of thinkers defended a modal Trinity: the one God disclosed in three modes or manifestations. These people were variously called Unitarians, Patripassians (because they believed the Father suffered), or Sabellians (after Sabellius, a presbyter in Ptolemais, c. AD 250). They defended the deity of Christ (and on this one point aligned with historic Christian belief), but they denied personal distinctions in the Godhead. In their view, the one and the same person is simultaneously Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These labels express the different relations that God sustains with the world and the church, just as do other labels (e.g., Creator, King, Sustainer). But one cannot say that God the Creator addresses God the King: there is only one person. So on this view, the one person, God, has revealed himself in various manifestations or modes (hence this view is sometimes called modalism); we are not dealing with one God who has disclosed himself to be three persons, each of whom can and does address the

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other. It was not long before the church roundly condemned modalism, not least because Scripture is replete with passages in which, for instance, the Father addresses the Son, and the Son the Father.

When orthodox believers sought language to summarize the idea that each person of the Godhead is a self-conscious agent (the Latin category is *suppositum intelligens*), in the Greek part of the ancient world they first settled on *prosōpon* (“face”). But the Sabellians understood the same word to mean something like “aspect,” and they defended the view that God revealed himself under a threefold aspect. Eventually the orthodox settled on *hypostasis*. Among the Latin speakers, Christians settled on *substantia* or *persona*—and hence our English word “person.” (See chart below.) Christian thinkers have argued for centuries exactly how we should understand *persona* in Latin and “person” in English, but the very least that had to be affirmed was the deeply entrenched biblical reality that the “persons” of the Godhead interact with one another, address one another, love one another, in a “personal” way.

Terms Expressing God’s Oneness and Threeness

	Greek	Latin	English
One	<i>ousia, physis</i>	<i>substantia, essentia</i>	being, substance, essence, nature
Three	<i>hypostaseis, prosōpa</i>	<i>personae</i>	persons, subsistences, modes of subsistence

This chart is from John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God, A Theology of Lordship* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002], 697; see pp. 696-705.

Of course, the doctrine of the Trinity is much richer than these few lines suggest. As Christians in the third and fourth century studied the biblical evidence, they insisted that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit express necessary, internal, and eternal *relations* in the Godhead. Today, of course, we sometimes quickly summarize the doctrine of the Trinity: the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God, and there is but one God. That is true as far as it goes, but it does not guard very well against modalism. The early church taught “that the Father eternally, necessarily, and incomprehensibly communicates the divine essence to the Son without division or change so that the Son shares an equality of nature with the Father yet is also distinct from the Father” (this is the careful summary of Keith E. Johnson, “Augustine, Eternal Generation, and Evangelical Trinitarianism,” *TrinJ* 32 [2011]: 141-163). The language of “communication” was judged crucial: the *essence* is absolute and communicable, and the early church fathers spoke of this communication in terms of the eternal generation of the Son, while the *person* is incommunicable, i.e., it cannot be shared. So while one joyfully confesses

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that the Son is God and the Father is God, the church throughout its history has equally insisted that the Son is not the Father and the Father is not the Son. The church needs a robust Trinitarianism to avoid modalism on the one hand and tritheism on the other.

Had we the space and time, it would be delightful to justify this synthesis by providing the exegesis of many passages, and then extend the discussion from Father and Son to the Spirit. Someone might ask, “But what does it matter?” The answer is twofold: (1) If this summary accurately captures at least some of the glorious truth of the nature of the Godhead, to abandon it is to abandon a true understanding of God. If we are to worship God aright, we must worship him as he is, as he has disclosed himself to us. The only alternative is to worship a god who is progressively false as our understanding skews away from the truth. (2) Various truths connected with the gospel itself become incoherent if one abandons robust Trinitarianism. The Father sends the Son; the Son demonstrates his love for the Father by obeying him all the way to the cross; the Son addresses his Father in the anguished cry, “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?”; the Father gives the elect to the Son; in the plan of God, the Son propitiates the wrath of God and expiates sin; in the wake of his ascension and session at the Father’s right hand, the Son reigns as the Father’s mediatorial king until he has crushed all opponents, when he will turn the entire scope over to his Father; indeed, when the Son “offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death . . . he was heard because of his reverent submission” ([Heb 5:7](#)). None of these *relational* displays—and there are many others in the drama of redemption—is coherent under modalism. These relations are tied up with the nature of the Godhead. It is not surprising that those who adopt modalism habitually slide toward a diminished gospel.

In his *Institutes*, John Calvin sums it up: “Say that in the one essence of God there is a trinity of persons: you will say in one word what Scripture says, and cut short empty talkativeness.” He then adds that, in his experience, those who “persistently quarrel” over these words “nurture a secret poison” (I.13.5).

2. Biblicism One and Biblicism Two

In the recent Elephant Room (hereafter ER2), T. D. Jakes says that he affirms that God is three persons, but he prefers to speak of three manifestations—and then he provides a text to justify this conclusion: “God was manifest in the flesh” ([1 Tim 3:16](#) KJV). As Pastor Jakes points out, that is what Paul says, and surely we do not want to write Paul off as a modalist, do we? Isn’t Pastor Jakes making a *biblical* argument? Don’t Christians want to defend such committed biblicism?

It is important to untangle this argument in two steps.

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First, Pastor Jakes says that he affirms that God is three persons. In ER2, he affirms it again, somewhat laconically, when asked the question directly. We are delighted to hear it. Moreover, he states that some Oneness Pentecostals now think him a heretic because of it. Of course, the Oneness Pentecostal movement has various strands. Some think of him as a heretic, while others in the movement think he is acceptable, even heroic, because at the same time he says he prefers to speak of three manifestations. That must be very reassuring to “soft” Oneness Pentecostals. But the response is deeply disturbing. What does Pastor Jakes mean?

He might mean one of several things. We’ll mention three. (a) He may mean, “Words don’t matter very much; I can go with ‘persons’ or ‘manifestations,’ and I prefer the latter.” As one commentator has put it, “It’s just semantics.” But words *do* matter, because they are used to express truth and falsehood. In our first pairing, we tried to show that our very understanding of God is bound up with these words, and with it the gospel. Historically, the expressions have not meant the same thing. If Pastor Jakes can use either expression, which one does he mean? (b) He might mean that he is a Trinitarian, but that he prefers the language of manifestations. But *why* does he prefer the latter terminology? Because he is unaware of the historic debates and their doctrinal significance? Because he wants to appeal to the “soft” Oneness folk? And if the latter, how is he weaning them away from false doctrine if he continues to use the terminology that is associated in their minds with Oneness theology? (c) Or is he really a modalist who concedes “person” language now and then, even though he prefers “manifestations,” in order to be acceptable in a wider circle?

The short answer is, we don’t know.

In a much-quoted statement deriving from 2000, Pastor Jakes says he believes that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have “distinct and separate functions. . . . [E]ach has individual attributes.” Let’s give him the benefit of the doubt for a moment. It would be good to ask him some other questions, such as, “Do you think the Son existed, as the Son, before he was sent by his Father into the world [[John 3:17](#)]?” Just when our sense of charity hopes that Pastor Jakes really is Trinitarian in his thought but sadly untaught, he adds (in that same 2000 interview) that the discussion is guilty of “splitting hairs” and “semantics”: no one is dying for lack of theology—they die for lack of love. Suddenly all our questions surface again. *Of course* people can die for lack of love; but they *can also* die for lack of theology. If our theology of God is very wide of the mark, we are believing in a false god. And Paul knows that a “gospel” that is no gospel at all is dangerous, and even dares to pronounce an anathema on those who preach a false gospel ([Gal 1:8-9](#)). We no more dare excuse bad or slippery theology in the name of love than we dare excuse brittle lovelessness in the name of orthodoxy.

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Meanwhile, we remain uncertain if Pastor Jakes holds to a robust Trinitarianism or not. Sometimes he seems to, as when he observes, quite rightly, that the Father addresses the Son at his baptism. But then again, he prefers to speak of manifestations.

That brings us to the *second* step: his appeal to [1 Timothy 3:16](#). “God was manifest in the flesh” (KJV): apparently Pastor Jakes, not to mention some of his post-ER2 supporters, thinks this line supports his preference for three manifestations rather than three persons. It does no such thing; this is scandalously bad exegesis. Note: (a) For this verse to support the preference for manifestations terminology, it would have to support the proposition that God was manifest in the Father, God was manifest in the Son, and God was manifest in the Spirit—for that is what the “manifestations” terminology, applied to the Godhead, is all about. (b) In other words, the “manifest” verb in [1 Timothy 3:16](#) is not a technical expression justifying three “manifestations,” but common language that means God displayed himself in the flesh or expressed himself in the flesh or appeared in the flesh. That is why the NIV renders the passage, “He appeared in the flesh.” Should we conclude that this rendering, perfectly accurate, justifies a theory of three appearances?

Now we are getting to the nub of the issue in this second pairing. There is a kind of appeal to Scripture, a kind of biblicism—let’s call it Biblicism One—that seems to bow to what Scripture says but does not listen to the text very closely and is almost entirely uninformed by how thoughtful Christians have wrestled with these same texts for centuries. There is another kind of biblicism—let’s call it Biblicism Two—that understands the final authority in divine revelation to lie in Scripture traceable to the God who has given it, but understands also that accurate understanding of that Scripture is never supported by bad exegesis and always enriched by the work of Christian thinkers who have gone before.

Here is where the distinction becomes interesting. *Neither* the terminology of “manifestations” preferred by Oneness Pentecostals and other modalists *nor* the terminology of “persons” supported by historic creeds is directly used in Scripture. Where does it come from? It comes from thinkers two or three centuries after the New Testament was written who were doing their best to summarize large tracks of biblical themes and texts in faithful, accurate summaries, *even if the terminology was not directly dependent on the terminology of a specific verse or two*. History has shown, for the reasons briefly set forth in our first pairing, that the terminology of “manifestations” was soundly trounced and declared heretical: it simply could not be squared with what the Bible says. The “persons” terminology prevailed (along with words like “subsistence”) not because it derived directly from usage in the biblical documents themselves, but because it could be shown that this terminology did a great job of summarizing what the Bible actually says.

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If you don't like this example, it is easy to find others. The doctrine of justification, for example, was not invented in Reformation times. Tom Oden ([The Justification Reader](#) [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002]) has amply demonstrated how justification was discussed in the patristic period. Nevertheless, in God's providence the disputes of sixteenth-century Europe provided much more intense study of these matters than what was undertaken in previous centuries. The result was much more exegetical rigor and theological synthesis. Just as the Christological and Trinitarian disputes of the third and fourth centuries generated syntheses *that were actually grounded in the Bible* and designed to reject false teaching, so the justification debates did something analogous in the sixteenth century. Just as the Christological debates generated theological terms like "essence" and "person," belonging to the domain of systematic theology yet actually reflecting faithful biblical synthesis, so the justification debates generated theological terms that analyzed "faith" under rubrics like *notitia* (the content of faith), *assensus* (confidence that this faith-content is true), and *fiducia* (trust in the true content of faith such that it changes how you live).

To attempt theological interpretation without reference to such developments is part and parcel of Biblicism One; to attempt theological interpretation that is self-consciously aware of such developments and takes them into account is part and parcel of Biblicism Two. We hasten to add that both Biblicism One and Biblicism Two insist that final authority rests with the Bible. All the theological syntheses are in principle revisible. Yet the best of these creeds and confessions have been grounded in such widespread study, discussion, debate, and testing against Scripture that to ignore them tends to cut oneself off from the entire history of Christian confessionalism. The Bible remains theoretically authoritative (Biblicism One), but in fact it is being manipulated and pummeled by private interpretations cut off from the common heritage of all Christians.

Some months ago, James MacDonald wrote:

I affirm the doctrine of the Trinity as I find it in Scripture. I believe it is clearly presented but not detailed or nuanced. I believe God is very happy with His Word as given to us and does not wish to update or clarify anything that He has purposefully left opaque. Somethings [*sic*] are stark and immensely clear, such as the deity of Jesus Christ; others are taught but shrouded in mystery, such as the Trinity. I do not trace my beliefs to creedal statements that seek clarity on things the Bible clouds with mystery. I do not require T. D. Jakes or anyone else to define the details of Trinitarianism the way that I might. His [Jakes's] website states clearly that he believes God has existed eternally in three manifestations.

This, of course, is Biblicism One. As a statement about the location of final authority, it is as admirable as Biblicism Two. The thing to note is that it uses the language of "three

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manifestations,” which is *not* found in Scripture, so while claiming the authority of Biblicism One *it is nevertheless sanctioning post-biblical categories*. We simply cannot escape the fact that our linguistic labels are shaped by prior discussion. But if the statement had taken into account the detailed discussions about “manifestations” that have informed Christian reflection since the fourth century, the author would have insisted that “manifestations” is *not* an acceptable way to talk about the Godhead, and that there are detailed reasons for preferring “persons” — reasons that are grounded not in arbitrary or personal semantic preference, but in words that have been used to summarize large swaths of Christian teaching about God and which are faithful to this synthesis.

Several Christians challenged James on these matters, and James accepted the correction with humility and grace, and soon came down off that ledge. We want to give him full credit for that. Not all Christian leaders could have accepted the correction as well, and we are only bringing it up as an instructive example. Yet that is the ledge on which T. D. Jakes seems currently to be perched. His commitment to Biblicism One does not mean that he is, in the best sense, “biblical,” and his handling of [1 Timothy 3:16](#) on a topic of this importance is not reassuring.

3. Prosperity Gospel and Empowerment

ER2 addressed many pastorally interesting and useful topics. Quite a number of commentators, however, have expressed disappointment that no one pushed T. D. Jakes on his apparent support for the prosperity gospel.

Pastor Jakes prefers to think that what he is preaching is a kind of empowerment to oppressed people rather than a prosperity gospel. The distinction is an important one. The Bible supports a certain kind of empowerment; indeed, one and the same gospel tends to build up the oppressed and slap down the haughty. On the one hand, [James 1:9](#) says, “Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position.” Believers who are dirt poor, ill, dismissed as nothing in society, are nevertheless already children of the King of kings, and will, with Lazarus, one day lie on Abraham’s bosom (Luke 16:19-37). On the other hand, [James 1:10-11](#) says, “But the rich should take pride in their humiliation [Isn’t that a delightful phrase, worthy of much reflection?]—since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.” At least some applications of the gospel will be a little different where there is a congregation of broken, indigent people as compared with where there is a congregation of wealthy, successful people.

Yet it is easy to hide a prosperity gospel under the much more acceptable banner of merely empowering the broken. There are two ways to tell. *First*, discover whether the

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eternal and universal realities of the gospel “once for all entrusted to God’s holy people” ([Jude 3](#))—not just some of them—lie at the center of what is being preached. *Second*, find out how much of the “empowerment” focuses on material health and prosperity in this life. Since his breakthrough book, *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*, Pastor Jakes has left an impressive trail of books and downloads to enable you to assess such matters for yourself. Moreover, the [9Marks website offers penetrating and careful reviews](#) of most the books that Pastor Jakes has written. As far as the evidence goes, we do not see how it is unfair to characterize the burden of much of his ministry as a combination of prosperity gospel and moralizing personal improvement.

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4. Love and Truth

A fair bit has been posted on the lovelessness of TGC in general and of some of its members in particular. We cannot help but notice that there are two categories of charges that contradict each other somewhat. On the one hand, we love issues more than people; we should be reconcilers, not haters; we are called to love one another, and we are failing in this regard. On the other hand, quite a few bloggers have criticized TGC for being too silent: in a word, we are cowards instead of standing up for the truth, caving in to megachurch pastors instead of speaking the truth.

We are not above reproach in either direction. All of us will answer to God on the last day; on a much shorter scale, the Council of the Coalition will certainly weigh very carefully at our May meeting what we have and have not done. What we are quite certain of, however, is that the apostle who so movingly writes [1 Corinthians 13](#) also writes many things about the non-negotiability of the truth of the gospel. He can be surprisingly patient with preachers with bad motives provided that what they preach is the gospel ([Phil 1](#)), but when the Jesus who is being preached is “a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached,” Paul can label the preachers “false apostles” who are “masquerading as apostles of Christ” ([2 Cor 11](#)) and insist that the Corinthians expel them.

What that means, of course, is that Christian leaders are charged with discerning when and how the tough line must be taken. Even when discipline is demanded, it should never be vituperative. But to appeal to the many passages that exhort us to love without simultaneously thinking through the many passages that bind us to uphold the truth is not only one-sided, it is in danger of being manipulative: if you do not agree with me, you are unloving. Of course, the manipulation can run the other way: if you do not reject this person or this position, you do not care for the truth.

The most recent biography Iain Murray has written is the [life of Archibald Brown](#), one of the successors of Charles Spurgeon. Murray gives us a thumb-nail sketch of the Downgrade controversy (something he filled out in more detail in his earlier volume, [The](#)

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Forgotten Spurgeon). Spurgeon, Brown, and others were increasingly concerned by the effect of German rationalism on Baptist churches in England. What is so striking is how often their opponents charged Spurgeon and his friends with lovelessness, arrogance, old-fashioned small-mindedness—often in a singularly unloving way—*without ever engaging the matters of substance*. Here, for example, is the *Nonconformist and Independent* for 17 November, 1887: “Mr Spurgeon and those who follow him seem to be intent upon accentuating the differences of Nonconformists, instead of seeking to draw nearer to each other by unity with their Lord.” So the issue Spurgeon thought important is not taken up, but Spurgeon himself is divisive. It is easy to multiply historical examples of this sort.

Those who take up important theological issues must do so in love, examining their own hearts, avoiding snarkiness and oneupmanship; those who appeal to love and unity need to actually engage with the issues, refusing to duck them.

5. Racism and Playing the Race Card

Doubtless this is the most delicate, sensitive, and complicated of the issues that have arisen, and we do not want to add to the confusion by saying too much or too little, or by writing with the wrong tone. But it would be irresponsible if we said nothing.

About three weeks ago the majority of the African American Council members of TGC made it clear that they felt the white members, not least the leadership, were more sensitive to white theological issues than to black theological issues. After all, TGC had mounted an informed, careful, and bold response to Rob Bell when the incipient universalism of his latest book started to receive national attention and threaten the truth of Scripture and the nature of the gospel. Our African American brothers pointed out, however, that Rob Bell is not perceived to be a great threat in African American circles. But these brothers felt pretty strongly that T. D. Jakes *is* a huge issue in *their* circles. On this issue, they thought, TGC was insensitive to what they thought of as a much greater threat.

There were about ten of us involved in those discussions. As soon as matters were articulated like that, the white men among us could not help but see that the charge was justified. Insensitivity on matters of race can be such a subtle thing. By and large, white Christian leaders tend to think that racism is no longer a huge issue, while black Christian leaders tend to think it remains a huge issue: even our perceptions of the significance of the problem are not on the same page. But in this case we caught a glimpse of something that we knew theoretically, but were now seeing up front: there is still a lot of hidden culpable insensitivity around until we are no less eager to engage the “other’s” concerns than our own.

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Of course, the issue was complicated by at least two other factors. *First*, not all African American members saw things the same way. But why should that surprise us? Not all white Christians see things the same way, either. Still, the clear majority of our African American brothers on the Council let us know, rightly, that they were upset. And we judged we had clearly been in the wrong. *Second*, in one way, of course, this issue was different from Rob Bell's book, in that there had been no member of the Council who was committed to exploring how acceptable Rob Bell's theology might be within historic confessionalism, but there were some members of the Council who were committed to exploring T. D. Jakes in this way. But that meant, of course, that the racial insensitivity issue that the majority of our African American brothers on the Council brought up was linked with Jakes's modalist heritage and his prosperity gospel, which in the words of a couple of them, was "ravaging" the black churches. From their perspective, some of them had paid considerable cost for publicly standing against Pastor Jakes. They had done so precisely because their minds and hearts had been captured by the glorious gospel of the blessed God—and when they needed the most support, the white brothers were letting them down. Suddenly all the theological "pairings" we have articulated in this blogpost were linked together.

Subtleties and ironies surfaced everywhere in the subsequent developments. Some wanted to give T. D. Jakes a pass on the ground that African American churches are more interested in redemption than creeds. That's a bit like giving Jonathan Edwards a pass on slavery because he was a man of his own time and class. All of us must hold one another to the standard of God's most holy Word. In fact, it is a kind of insult to Pastor Jakes to give him a pass because of his ethnicity.

It will serve no good purpose to provide a detailed step-by-step account of all that unfolded from that point on. But we must insist in the strongest terms that the white Council members acted not only out of doctrinal and pastoral concerns, but newly aware that we had flubbed the racism test and were trying to make things right. Equally, the African American Council members, far from kowtowing to white concerns, were themselves acting out of their deepest doctrinal and pastoral commitments—commitments for which some of them had already paid a considerable price. It does them—not to say historic Christian confessionalism—an enormous disservice to charge them with betraying their ethnicity. Historic Christian confessionalism is not the private playground of middle-aged white guys. Have we forgotten that the most brilliant and influential thinker in the fourth century when many of the Trinitarian controversies came to resolution was a North African by the name of Augustine?

6. Private and Public

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For our purposes, this topic has at least three dimensions.

First, talking with T. D. Jakes in ER2 has been cast as listening to someone first before we say anything critical of him. Relationships precede evaluation. Anyone who ventures a critical evaluation of Pastor Jakes *before* ER2 is simply being judgmental. With respect, this argument does not hold up to either Scripture or reason. Pastor Jakes is not a private individual about whom some people might have heard a few negative things. If that were the case, it *would* be imperative to uncover the truth before passing on what would in that case be nothing more than gossip. Pastor Jakes, however, is a public individual. He himself publishes his views in various media; they circulate widely. He is read and heard around the world. Not long ago in a Christian bookshop in South Africa, one of the writers of this article discovered that the author with the greatest number of books on the shelf was T. D. Jakes. It is the *responsibility* of Christian pastors to become aware of such a preacher and teacher if his works are significantly influencing their own flocks. To imagine that no fair evaluation is possible before an ER2-type public event does not square with apostolic practice. When in [2 Corinthians 10-13](#) Paul learns of interlopers who are preaching another Jesus, he does not begin by arranging a fireside chat. The content and direction of the interlopers' ministry is already public, and Paul confronts it.

Second, one might well ask, "But isn't it different when someone seems to be leaving the camp of a demonstrably false theology, and becoming more orthodox? Isn't this sort of public discussion in that case very helpful?" Perhaps. In our view, however, there is a better way. A quarter of a century ago, one of us was involved, with other Christian leaders, in several intense, probing discussions with leaders of a major cult. Neither sidewanted these discussions to be public; they took place behind closed doors, without cameras or reporters. The cultists were wanting serious discussions with us because their own reading of Scripture was gradually bringing them around to historic confessional orthodoxy. In due course they went public on their own terms, and brought out many of their followers into evangelicalism. That development would not have taken place had the discussions been held in the open.

It is surely a wise and strategic thing to engage in probing conversations with many people with views very dissimilar to our own—not only Christians, but non-Christians, too. And many of our Council members are involved in such discussions, partly in function of normal human friendships, partly in function of Christian witness. Sometimes discussions take place with gifted orators whose theology is still a bit wonky: there is always a place for a Priscilla and an Aquila to teach an Apollos to understand the way of God a little better than he has understood it so far, and there is always a place for a Paul to reason with pagan philosophers in the Areopagus. Many of us are so involved. But

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that is a bit different from trying to reform another's theology in a public setting where the trappings and attitudes largely suggest everyone is already on the same side.

Third, as useful as it is on so many fronts, the internet is not notable for fostering discretion in this arena. Bloggers who have no idea of how many hours have been spent in private conversation to win someone to a better way often write with instantaneous public appraisals and unfettered language. They invariably think they write with prophetic insight; sometimes, at least, the contempt displayed is simply sinful. A colleague recently reminded one of us how Calvin set up four organizations in Geneva: the Company of Preachers, the Congregation, the Ordinary Censure, and the Consistory, each with its own responsibilities and assignments. It is the third that is of interest here: the Ordinary Censure brought together the area pastors four times a year, behind closed doors, where they addressed one another with their perceptions of another's false teaching, dealt with personality conflicts, and the like. The aim was to work things out, hold one another accountable, and bring correction and healing. Each of those four meetings was scheduled one week before the quarterly celebration of the Lord's Table. The accountability was remarkable—and it was possible, at least in part, because of the regularity and privacy of the Ordinary Censure. This was not designed to skirt the biblical instruction that where there is public accusation against an elder that is found to be justified, the elder is to be reprovved before everyone ([1 Tim 5:19-20](#)), but it was designed to be a mutually correcting and restorative venue before matters had progressed that far.

We conclude by reiterating what we said in the opening lines. The purpose of this post is not to provide a re-hash of recent events, still less to assign blame. It is to provide some theological and pastoral reflection on the interlocking issues with which we have been wrestling.

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<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/carson-and-keller-on-jakes-and-the-elephant-room/>