

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

What Makes Steven Furtick's Elevation Church So Popular and Yet So Controversial?

JOSHUA PEASE

1



In the 1920s, a psychologist hand-drew a series of blob-like shapes used to determine a patient's personality characteristics. Named after its founder Hermann Rorschach, the Rorschach test became a cultural shorthand for anything—a person, a piece of art, a political movement—that was seen a variety of different ways by different people. The test's premise is how you see the object says as much about you as it does the object.

Steven Furtick Theology

In the evangelical world, Steven Furtick and his Elevation Church is the ultimate Rorschach test. How you see him reveals your beliefs about church growth, theology, pastoral accountability and seeker sensitivity. For some, Furtick and his 17,000+ congregation is the paragon of church growth. For others, he's a leadership crisis waiting to happen. Some consider him one of the most powerful pastoral voices in the country. Others say he's a heretic.

Certainly, Furtick isn't the first visible church leader to draw this varied a reaction, but right now he's arguably the most famous. So the question is, who is right? And what does the controversy surrounding Furtick say not just about him, but about us?

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“REACHING THOSE FAR FROM GOD”

Online magazine *Pitchfork* is arguably the most respected music review publication in the world. Reaching 1.5 million readers a month, the magazine is known for targeting independent artists and scenes. Which is why [Pitchfork's recent profile](#) about Elevation Church's worship music is so remarkable. Elevation Church has caught the attention of the secular music world.

The article, written by a self-professed non-religious journalist, is shockingly positive. Free of the snarky condescension found in many secular articles written about evangelicalism, the article shines a largely complementary light on the pastors of Elevation. The pastors discuss their engagement with all music, not just Christian music, the importance of musical excellence, and their desire to draw people through their music to a deeper relationship with God.

The writer is surprised by Elevation's racial diversity “despite the frankly very white rock music that forms the backbone of the church's sound.” And while one would assume the music's styling isn't his preference, the writer communicates a respect and understanding of what he perceives Elevation is trying to accomplish: “It's this idea of reaching those ‘far from God’ that helps explain the strange paradox at the heart of Elevation—using one of the most notoriously profane styles of music to soundtrack weekly services and act as a beacon for faith in God.”

Furtick probably did backflips when he read that paragraph. It's the dream of every seeker-friendly church: to have an unchurched person attend their services and get the message: We want to do whatever we can to point you toward God.

But there have been multiple controversies surrounding Elevation Church and specifically Furtick's leadership.

SPONTANEOUS BAPTISM DEBATE

In 2012, a video went viral of one of Elevation's spontaneous baptism services where over 2,000 came forward to be baptized. In 2013, a document Elevation released to help other churches do their own spontaneous baptism caught attention. [You can read a scathing critique of the article here](#), but the most controversial part is where churches are encouraged to plant people throughout the auditorium to prime the pump for a response. It's unclear whether the people picked to respond had already requested to be baptized or not.

And this is where the Rorschach test kicks in. I've worked for a very large megachurch, and when you're doing things on a large scale, a high amount of organization is needed

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to pull off anything. This organization can easily look like (and sometimes be) emotional manipulation or a callous business strategy.

Depending on your point of view, this document is either a smoking gun, a shrewd organizational strategy or somewhere in between.

LEADERSHIP, ACCOUNTABILITY AND EGO

3

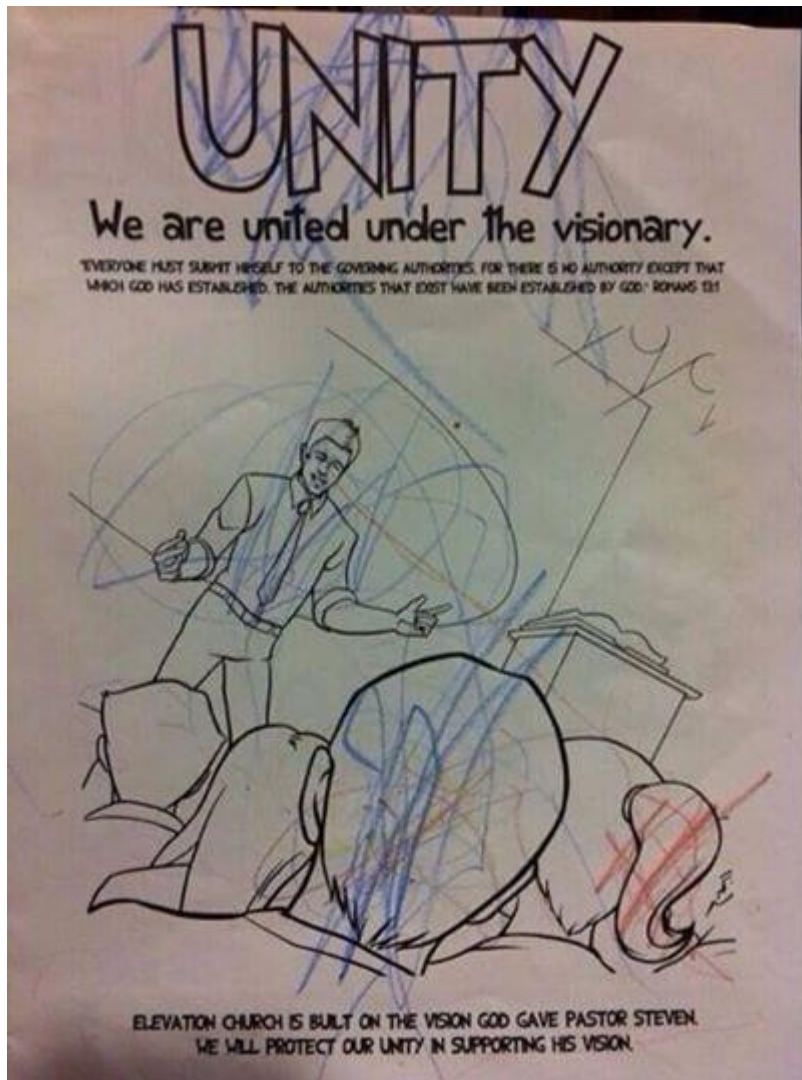
There is no direct oversight of Furtick at Elevation Church. Rather, he is overseen by a collection of megachurch pastors who make up a board of overseers that Furtick himself is a part of. This is a similar structure to the one Mark Driscoll employed at Mars Hill, and it's a structure that has been widely criticized since Driscoll's departure and the church's consequent dissolution.

Furtick owns a \$1.7 million, 16,000-square-foot house that, according to him, "isn't that big of a house really." As criticism of his personal lifestyle increased, Furtick stopped doing interviews on topics other than his book; however, in 2015 Furtick did say in regards to financial accountability that "to go on record and say here's how much money we've given and here's what we do with our finances, to me, that would be the most arrogant thing I could do and it would rob me of the blessings of what Jesus said, which is that when you give, you don't get up and tell everyone how much you've given."

On one hand, Furtick is the pastor of one of the largest churches in the country and undoubtedly makes a large salary. On the other hand, many famous pastors—such as Rick Warren or [Andy Stanley](#)—have been very cautious in the appearance of wealth for this very reason. Buying a \$1.7 million mansion might not be wrong, but also isn't very wise.

The hardest problem to overlook is how central "God's vision to Pastor Steven" is in Elevation Church's DNA. In a coloring book made for Elevation's Sunday School ministry, there's a page that says, "Elevation Church is built on the vision God gave pastor Steven. We will protect our unity in supporting his vision."

Lion and Lamb Apologetics



Elevation once released an infographic that said:

- We serve a Lead Pastor who seeks and hears from God.
- We serve a Lead Pastor we can trust.
- We serve a Lead Pastor who goes first.

For those with a deep-seated conviction about pastoral authority and not undercutting “the Lord’s anointed” perhaps even this isn’t problematic; but considering [the cautionary tale, after cautionary tale, after cautionary tale](#) we’ve heard from megachurch pastors whose fame led to their downfall, Furtick’s centering himself as the unassailable visionary for the church is concerning.

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This is what makes Furtick and Elevation Church the perfect Rorschach test. Furtick is a phenomenal communicator who has reached millions with a message of hope. His church has partially bridged the obstacle of racial hegemony and is engaging an unchurched culture successfully. And yet many can't shake the warning signs that something isn't quite right with the church, with the leadership and with the culture.

But like all Rorschach tests, it's subjective. Everyone sees something a little different. And, with churches, it usually takes years to tell who was right.



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<https://churchleaders.com/news/302658-makes-steven-furticks-elevation-church-popular-yet-controversial.html>

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