

Enough is Enough: Why We Can and Must Take Bloggers to Court

By: Dr. James MacDonald

It barely bears mentioning that the internet can be a blessing and a real bear. Medicine, for instance, can advance through unparalleled information sharing, even while pornographers viciously victimize innocents through shame and isolation.

This same dichotomy of blessing and bane is especially true of the notorious internet subset called “blogs.” I once had a top 10 Christian blog that was reaching tens of thousands of people each time I posted with encouragement and teaching – but Christian ministries have also, too often been the vicious target of bloggers’ divisive campaigns to discredit.

Two weeks ago, after six years of ‘taking it too personally,’ our church’s Board of Elders decided to take legal action against those who have harmed our ministry through their careless campaign to discredit. We thought it would help to tell our friends why.

Bloggers Without Credibility are Given Too Much Credence

It used to be that you had to accomplish something to get your voice heard above the unceasing rumble of news cycles, politico-religious rancor, and the cacophony of sports entertainment. In the last millennium, if you didn’t have something profound, proprietary or penetrating to say, no one would stop to listen. Before the internet, there just weren’t enough people in proximity to gain a following for your particular “pinterest” – but all that has changed.

Now anyone who breathes can get a microphone – even if their thoughts are not rigorous, even if their statements are not entirely true. In this new world, people who struggle with the same micro-ailment of mind or body, who uphold the same partisan creed or caution can gather affirmation on a world-wide scale with no regard for fact checking or due process. A few moments of impassioned typing after midnight on any subject, regardless of credential or credence, nearly ensures the blogger will have enough approval by morning to believe their work is urgent – and needs repeating.

Our observation is that hobby bloggers harm too many ministers and ministries, and more importantly, the people we are called to serve. The time has come for some of us to step up and say this isn’t okay. Enough is enough.

Attack Blogs Need a Perfect Storm

I know this from painful, personal experience. In the fall of 2012, our church was flourishing with more than 13,000 in weekly attendance, publishing worship music, planting churches around the world – we even embarked upon a 40-city tour sharing our vision for a “Vertical Church.” Despite our victories, we were also struggling through a construction catastrophe throughout 2007 that had, by 2009, pushed our church mortgage to nearly \$60 million. Then, a church we planted that some former leaders obligated us to beyond board approval, added \$6 million more.

To address the decision-making gaps that had allowed our mortgage to balloon, a team of lay leaders and ultimately our entire board, expanded the Elder Board numerically, increased the variety and quality of board member competency, and clarified our policies for governance. The result ended our 22-year-model

of essentially appointing 'Elders for life,' which had led to an ingrown board that had become, by its own admission, dysfunctional.

Amidst it all, we also attempted to address the lack of loving interaction between Christian leaders by hosting a series of dialogues we called The Elephant Room, which intentionally brought together different points of view on controversial subjects. David Platt and Steven Furtick, Bishop T.D. Jakes and Matt Chandler – men who seldom or never talked – gathered for healthy discussions that were inspiring to most but also enraging to a few. The goal was not exhaustive refutation but gracious interaction, yet skeptics seized the absence of doctrinal confrontation as evidence that we endorsed every point of divergence.

In the church governance matter we could have communicated better, and in the conference we surely stretched our community too quickly. The result of both was a perfect storm of criticism that began six years ago this month, at the hands of obsessive bloggers who made their intent clear: Either James MacDonald leaves Harvest Bible Chapel or everyone else does.

It isn't that some of the criticism wasn't fair. I believe in the marketplace of ideas and of regular, vibrant discussion inside a local church. It's just that their words were often untrue, their information was incomplete, and over time their tone of reasonableness disintegrated, exposing their obvious goal of ending our ministry. Over a three-year period, their materially harmful untruths drove more than 2000 members out of our church – a church we founded with a handful of people more than 30 years ago and have given our lives to. I was devastated.

We Neglected to Protect our Sheep

We loved these former members dearly, so our first efforts were to follow the biblical teaching on personal offense. We held many congregational meetings, owning the confusion from our conferences and confessing our failures to be broader and more transparent with our governance. We instituted policies to keep similar mistakes from happening in the future and continued aggressively reducing our mortgage (still on track to be mortgage free by 2023). We sought reconciliation with former leaders or staff the bloggers identified as offended. Yet it was never enough. Again and again, as something trivial, controversial or difficult would happen in the church, the bloggers would show up online as carnal commentators distorting the record, then giving voice through comments to people who used anonymity to say the cruelest and most vile things.

Enough is Enough – Call the Police

As months turned into years, the bloggers persisted, refusing all appeals and showing they were under no New Testament authority. Our multiple attempts to reconcile or at least meet with the bloggers to enlighten their opinions with factual information had reached a dead end. That impasse, along with their ongoing negative impact, caused our Elders to review the scriptural options for an approach that put our congregants first.

"Turn[ing] the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39) is a compelling command for dealing with people who offend us personally – but no one struggles with dialing 911 when a criminal act is underway. What about wrongs society agrees are so destructive that laws are established to prevent their continuance? Again, we know what to do when the activity is criminal (call the police), and we understand what to do with ecclesiastical matters (call the local church Elders), but what about when bloggers are civil lawbreakers and the activity is demonstrably illegal?

Churches have historically focused upon human government as a threat or intrusion. When sinful behavior becomes harmful, the Elders' priority must move from personally reconciling to protecting the flock God has given them to oversee. When harmful behavior becomes illegal, the board must partner with the authorities God has established (Romans 13:1). *We prayed so long for God to protect but somehow didn't see He already had.*

I always believed that 1 Corinthians 6:4-6 was an all-inclusive prohibition about Christians being in court together. But the text actually says "brother... against brother" – where allowing ourselves to be wronged solves the personal offense. Certainly, when the authority of the church is recognized by both parties, they must seek a resolution that is entirely handled inside the church. Yet if the matter is not personal but institutional, God's ordained authority in the civil court system (Romans 13:1) can be accessed to rule on and potentially limit or eliminate illegal behavior.

Again (I know this is new for some): *When professing believers refuse, over and over, to act like believers – refuse even to meet after many appeals over many years – we can, and I believe must, turn our attention to the matter of protecting our church family and seeking the protection God has established as His provision.*

Our Elders have moved beyond the personal elements and are asking the authorities to look objectively at the legality of the bloggers' actions and impose penalties according to law, to make them stop. Any award granted by the court after recovery of costs will be donated to an independent charity. We just want them to stop.

It is a joyless decision, but we are hopeful that our action will give hope to others suffering the same impact from irresponsible, sometimes anonymous attackers. Further, we pray that God will grant release to the attackers themselves to be freed from their sinful preoccupation. God knows how we love these people, having prayed so long for God to bless them (Luke 6:28).

More Ministries May Follow Suit

We are indeed living in an age of rage, fueled by 'fake news' where the presumption of innocence has almost universally given way to the presumption of guilt. Due process seems entirely disregarded in our national discourse and, for the church, this cultural decline can cause great damage to worship communities.

We have carefully reviewed the Scriptures related to the purpose of human government and the church. We have contacted many influential pastors and biblical scholars, and received near unanimous confirmation of our thinking. Now it's time to step up and say "enough is enough," employing less traditional but entirely biblical provisions from God.

No more sitting by doing nothing while digital attackers ravage the body of Christ. We filed our lawsuit this week. Please pray for hearts to soften, for hostility to end, and for this blight on the body of Christ, fashioned in bitterness, to be struck down by God's established authority, while we continue our mission to live a life of love toward all who have come to trust and appreciate the ministry we offer.

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