

Podcast: Denominational Plank Pulling

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[0 : 00] Hello, hello, hello.

Welcome to the Providence Podcast. My name is Chris Oswald, Senior Pastor at Providence Community Church. Today, I want to talk to you about a phenomenon that is exceedingly rare. Rare even than spontaneous self-combustion. One of the rarest phenomenon I've ever seen in my entire life. And that is what you might refer to as denominational self-awareness. Or as I'm calling it today, denominational plank pulling. Denominational plank pulling. Now, I want to start by just setting a few pieces on the board.

Within evangelicalism, there have been various disciple movements. Now, a lot of these discipleship movements are indistinguishable from denominations.

[1 : 09] Some are self-consciously denominations and some are self-consciously not denominations. But for the most part, they function in many respects as denominations.

For instance, Sovereign Grace Churches is a discipleship movement that became a denomination. The Navigators is a discipleship movement that is self-consciously not a denomination. But very similar. And then you have our friends out on the Palouse. The Moscow Industrial Complex. They are first and foremost a discipleship movement with a denomination and a publisher and so on and so forth.

And then you've got things like the Gospel Coalition. Desiring God. Paul Washer's HeartCry Ministries. The Founders and so on and so forth. Now, I've been at this long enough to give me some discernment of a particular man's sort of movement of origin.

Meaning, whenever I spend time with a Christian man, I have a decent chance of identifying which of these movements or others have been an influential part in their spiritual formation.

[2 : 31] And their masculinity is a part of that, right? A basic part of their identity. And so what I have seen over time is that a Sovereign Grace man acts in a different way than a Navigator man, than a Moscow man, than a Gospel Coalition man, than a Desiring God man, than a HeartCry man, and so on and so forth.

Now, recognizing this sort of thing is not really difficult. And no clear conclusion can be drawn by the phenomenon itself. Someone might look at some of my writing and say, oh, he writes like Doug Wilson.

Well, okay, you preach like C.J. Mahaney. To paraphrase the Great Knock, Lewis's severe logician professor, do you not see that your remark is meaningless?

Being able to discern these things is not really much of a gift. There's something beneath that, though, that needs to be discussed. The idea, basically, is that men are like grapes.

They taste like their terroir. They taste like the kind of grape they are and the kind of vineyard in which they were grown. Now, let me give you a little bit of a background on my interactions with various denominations.

[3 : 57] As many of you know, I grew up Southern Baptist, and my early days in pastoral ministry were in Southern Baptist context. But about 16 years ago, I was going to plant a church, and I made the conscious decision at that time to leave the Southern Baptist Convention in favor of finding a denomination that was more unified on the so-called Reformed doctrines of grace.

I didn't want to be a part of the SBC anymore because I came to see that the SBC stood for Soteriologically Blended Convention. And it just didn't seem like a good place to find good unity when the denomination itself was split on the very issue of sort of what the gospel actually is. And so at that time, and again, I think this is about 16 years ago, two choices seemed like potential fits. There was Acts 29, at the time headed by Mark Driscoll, and then there was Sovereign Grace, at the time headed by C.J. Mahaney.

The denominations had, at least on paper, similar theological convictions. And I'm speaking as the way things appeared to me as an outsider 16 years ago.

I have a far more nuanced view of those distinctions now, but at the time they seemed similar enough to both warrant exploration.

[5 : 22] They were sufficiently in line with my personal convictions to warrant a good look. So I spent time looking at both entities. I went to conferences. I listened to many messages and panels and read books and so on and so forth.

And again, it seemed like, well, there was a potential fit in both groups. Actually, at the time, I probably agreed more with the church planting strategy of Acts 29, which was different than the church planting strategy of Sovereign Grace.

And I would say now, after 16 years of experience, I was wrong to have been attracted to that model and far prefer the model that works in Sovereign Grace.

Now, I didn't have to spend much time thinking about their theology because on paper it flushed out. And I also just at that point was old enough where I just did not have a significant amount of interest in either founder.

It was obvious that both were good preachers. And it was also obvious to me that both had some shortcomings and maybe even some yellow flags. My main area of attention, by the way, backing up, I would have much more to say about that now, 16 years later, and why I think that the leader of Sovereign Grace at the time handled things better over the last 16 years than Mark did.

[6 : 50] But again, I'm trying to tell you just where I was at the time. But my main area of attention was, since it wasn't really theology and it wasn't really the founder, my main area of attention was simply, what kind of men were these movements producing?

That, at the time, was my chief motivation for joining a denomination at all. I wanted to be discipled and shaped and built up and so on and so forth. And so I looked at the average men involved in both movements.

That was key for me. The average men involved in both movements. And one of the things I noticed pretty early on is that both movements produced men of different quality and had different features. And like I was saying before, you had different kinds of grapes growing in different kinds of vineyards. I could see that there were attributes in Acts 29 men that were good.

And I could see that there were attributes in Sovereign Grace men that were good. And I could see that either of them had probably their fair share of toxic expressions of those particular brands of masculinity.

[8 : 10] But in the end, the men in Acts 29 looked somewhat like the man I already was, while the men in Sovereign Grace looked somewhat like the kind of man I was hoping to become.

So that's a big reason why I joined Sovereign Grace. And the main point I'm trying to make is that every discipleship movement produces a particular flavor profile, if you will.

You've got different wines from different regions. And every discipleship movement, every denomination makes a slightly different kind of man. I mean, that's even true of local churches. Every local church tends to produce a slightly distinct brand of man. But here's the thing. The thing that is important to understand is that no matter where the vineyard is located, no matter what the denomination is, every vineyard has a bad vintage now and then.

And the thing to bear in mind is that those bad vintages, to some degree, still bear unique markers of the soil they grew in.

[9 : 21] So one of the, I'm not great at wine, but one of the wines I can recognize immediately is like an Oregon River Valley Pinot Noir.

So I know what that tastes like. And if you gave me a bad batch, it would be gross, but I could still tell that it was a pinot from that particular, from the Columbia River Valley, I believe.

Let me give you a practical example in the person of Josh Harris. Because we're talking right now about how toxic masculinity as a concept is more complicated than we tend to discuss.

Every denomination has a brand of man, is my first argument, and that each one of those brands has its own sort of toxic expression.

The example being Josh Harris at one time, at one time he was Sovereign Grace's golden boy, and now he's a full apostate. But even in his apostasy, I would argue that he continues to bear certain features of his terroir, of his vineyard, of his time in Sovereign Grace.

[10:39] And then you have another apostate named Abraham Piper. And if you know his father's ministry, then you can see marks of that ministry still at work in the way Abraham Piper approaches his apostasy.

And then you've got Andy Stanley. See, I would say that all of these are toxic men, but they're toxic men of a certain variety. They still bear the marks of the environment in which they grew.

We have Andy Stanley, son of Charles Stanley, same idea. Now, each of these men are toxic in their own way, but they really are, to some degree, a toxic expression of the vision of masculinity that was presented to them in their environment as they were growing up.

Charles Stanley was a certain kind of man, and his son is a toxic version of that kind of man. John Piper is a certain kind of man, and if he had ever apostatized, I suspect he would have been indistinguishable from what his son is now.

The point is, is that there are certain kinds of men, and that each of these men have their own brand of bad apples. Some movements produce highly conscientious men, highly agreeable men.

[12:01] And when men from those movements apostatize, they tend to become toxically conscientious, toxically agreeable. I think that's Josh Harris.

I think that's Andy Stanley. And some movements produce combative men, men bred more or less explicitly for spiritual combat. And some of those men will become toxic.

And when they become toxic, we will find them being toxically combative. What we really need is this phenomenon I said at the beginning, which is rarer even than spontaneous self-combustion.

What we really need is for denominations to pull the planks out of their own eye. Sovereign grace needs to keep an eye on sovereign grace. Moscow on Moscow, so on and so forth.

The temptation is to see another movement as more problematic than your own. But that is not how Jesus taught us to think.

[13:01] There is a sense in which everybody rushes to perform very public autopsies on everybody else's apostates. Now, this isn't necessarily inappropriate as Jesus' own words in Matthew 7.

Let me read that to you. Let me read Matthew 7, 4 through 5. So I keep talking about plank pulling. I guess I should have read this verse to begin with. Jesus says in Matthew 7, verse 4, The argument isn't that one denomination could benefit from another denomination's criticism.

That's not the argument. The argument is that that criticism is only really useful once the denomination who is offering the criticism has learned to criticize itself.

So when we're rushing to perform very public autopsies on somebody else's apostates, when we're rushing to produce a toxology report on some other movement's toxic masculinity, If we haven't first taken the step as Jesus prescribes to understand the role our culture played in producing our culture's apostates, then we're not going to be useful critics.

We're not going to be helpful pullers of the speck out of our brother's eye. But I want to be honest. In all my years, I have never seen a denomination do this.

[14:47] Instead, I see denominational leaders very often, very accidentally, not willfully, but accidentally acting just like the world. Let me give you an example of how this plays out in the world.

As many of you know, I'm a dabbler in the so-called carnivore diet. But I tend to do it maybe 30 to 60 days out of the year and then just try to eat kind of low carb the rest of the year.

And what may not be super obvious because it's been so gradual is that I've been doing this for about six years, and I'm down about 60 pounds over the last six years.

And that really has not, it's fluctuated a little bit, but really I keep seeing a little bit of progress. And that progress usually happens right now. I typically do it from October to Thanksgiving.

So you know that I'm at least a casual advocate of carnivore diet, so I kind of follow this stuff a little bit. And what you'll find is that there is an ongoing battle between those following a vegan or vegetarian diet and those adhering to a carnivore diet.

[16:05] And what you'll find is that the vegans will mine the medical data to underline a correlation between excessive meat consumption and heart disease.

And the carnivore types will mine the medical data to show a correlation between veganism and anxiety, veganism and broken bones, and so on and so forth.

Now, neither group is serving their own movement by attempting to themselves get better, to deal with their own issues inherent with their own approach, because that would require humility.

Instead, they spend most of their time looking for the error in the other person's approach. So that's my simplistic view of a situation that is playing out right now.

There's a bit of a denominational feistiness happening. Not that it's ever not been a part of Christendom, but it seems to have reached in recent years a new level.

[17:08] That's the simplistic take on it. Every movement produces a certain kind of man, and every certain kind of man will have its apostates.

Every brand of man will have a toxic version. And that really what we need is denominational plank pulling, where denominations look at the role that their culture played in producing their apostates. Let me say this another way that is a bit more complex, and that has to do with a logical fallacy called the no true Scotsman fallacy.

The classic example that you'll, when you look this up, that you'll see published in most places is the following. A man says, no true Scotsman put sugar in his porridge.

Another man responds, but my uncle is Scottish, and he puts sugar in his porridge. To which the original man responds, like I said, no true Scotsman puts sugar in his porridge.

[18:14] This is how denominations typically disavow their own bad actors. They became toxic because they abandoned our culture, you see.

They became toxic because they abandoned our culture. But simultaneous to that, they will criticize other movements, saying that the apostates in those movements came about because of their culture.

Our bad men became bad because they abandoned our culture. Their bad men became bad because of their culture. See what I mean by plank pulling?

Once you see this, it's hard to unsee. Once you see the no true Scotsman fallacy at work in denominational life, it's really hard to unsee.

Now, like all other fallacies, no true Scotsman is not entirely false. In fact, I would argue that the no true Scotsman idea is, at some level, a biblical idea.

[19:19] First John 2:19. They went out from us because they were not of us. For if they had been of us, they would have continued with us.

But they went out that it might become plain that they were not of us. The truth is, is if you're going to adhere, like I do, to the doctrine of eternal security, the solution or the resolution of the apostate problem is inherently built upon the no true Scotsman concept.

So I wouldn't argue that no true Scotsman is an entirely false idea, completely unhelpful, and not actually, at some level, a fair description of the problem.

But what I'm seeing is an unbiblical, uneven application of the thing. Our bad men are bad in spite of our culture. Their bad men are bad because of their culture.

But if we're being intellectually honest, we would investigate our own culture's apostates and see what role, if any, our culture played in helping them become who they are.

[20:35] I suspect we would see some culpability there. But we would also see, undeniably, that the individual himself is ultimately to blame. The individual apostate is ultimately to blame.

The individual toxic man is ultimately to blame. But if we went through the effort of doing that, if we went through the effort of performing autopsies on our own apostates, we might develop a more holistic, reasonable, and true explanation for the abuses and excesses and toxicity we see coming out of other movements.

You can look at this from a purely theological perspective. What does an unregenerate man do with God's blessings? Well, all sorts of terrible things.

So are God's blessings to blame primarily? Is God to blame for giving them the culture, the sexuality, the safety, the money, the praise?

No, of course not. Of course not. Romans handles this issue explicitly. Now, speaking of New Testament books, we can move over one to the right and go into 1 Corinthians.

[21:59] And we can now talk about not unregenerate people, although I'm sure there were an unfortunately high number in Corinth. But let's assume that there were a number of Christians there as well.

In Romans 1, we're taught to think about individual responsibility in response to the culture of God, which is the creation of God.

Creation is sort of the ultimate culture. And we can see that unregenerate man will take God's blessings and turn them into perversions.

This is literally toxicity. This is what toxic masculinity is. It's taking a thing and perverting it, right? And we can see that the unregenerate man does that to God's blessings, God's culture, but that God is not to blame.

And then we move over a book into 1 Corinthians, and now let's talk about how Christians can even do this. A main problem with the Christians in Corinth was their excessive pride that came from their use of the charismatic gifts.

[23 : 14] Now, where did those gifts come from? Well, they came from the Spirit of God. Who abused those gifts? Most likely, many of those who abused those gifts were Christians.

So who is to blame? Is the Spirit to blame for creating within Corinth a culture of charisma? No. The individual Christians are to blame. Let me make this even simpler.

Do we blame Jesus for the existence of Judas? You see, if we were to practice denominational plank pulling, and we were to perform autopsies on our own apostates, we would come to two conclusions.

Maybe to some degree we have some responsibility, but ultimately we have one conclusion. Bad people going to be bad.

And every movement has its share of bad people. A number of years ago, John MacArthur hosted a conference and published a book by the name of Strange Fire.

[24 : 24] In this conference and in the book, MacArthur and friends threw the charismatic baby out with the bathwater. They came off very strong against the entire charismatic movement, blaming the wide variety of apostates within the charismatic movement on the theology of the charismatic movement in general.

Now MacArthur, if he had practiced denominational plank pulling, should have had a conference called Strange Fractures, in which he dealt with the dispensationalist hermeneutic. There is no short of apostates in the dispensationalist hermeneutic.

There's no short of abuses in the dispensationalist hermeneutic. There's no shortage of false prophets under the dispensationalist hermeneutic.

If MacArthur wanted to practice plank pulling, he should have done a conference on that theological issue, which was the closest to his own, that seemed to promote, in some way, to some degree, apostates coming out of his own camp.

Now I want to be clear, I don't think his motives were impure, but I think his thinking was unwise. I say all that to say this, I sure hope my denomination, Sovereign Grace, doesn't join with other movements in doing what MacArthur did toward charismatics, in doing the same thing toward those in Moscow.

[26 : 04] Now mind you, I have no problem at all hearing about the theology. If patriarchy is theologically wrong, then I'm eager to hear that case. If post-millennialism is wrong, then I'm eager to hear that case.

Only let us ensure that we're not tilting at windmills, windmills, or, you know, holding heresy trials for straw men. When you hold a heresy trial for straw men, the only, literally the only thing that happens is an increase in self-righteousness.

That is the only outcome of holding a heresy trial for straw men. Now, what I want us to do is just use complex, sophisticated, multi-causation thinking, both at home and abroad.

I want us to acknowledge that the apostates coming out of our own movement are mostly apostates because they were bad men.

And not mostly because we have a bad culture. There may be things that we would want to address, that we would want to tighten up, that we would want to make better so that we reduce even this, the remote possibility of our culture influencing the production of toxic men.

[27 : 33] And once we learn to do that in our own camp, then we can apply the same standard to those in other camps. All that to say, I sure hope sovereign grace doesn't strange fire Moscow.

Speaking of flamethrowers, I want to handle one adjacent issue. From time to time, I hear some grumbling about the so-called attention-seeking behavior of Moscow.

Now, this may or may not be a real problem. But one thing I would say is that I personally am highly sensitive toward men who are themselves seeking attention by grumbling about the attention-seeking behavior of Reverend Flamethrower.

We just keep going back to this plank problem. Let me close with an illustration. Suppose a young man announced in our local church that he had become very concerned about the spiritual state of

Moldovian supermodels.

He went to the pastors and said, I just can't get this burden lifted on my heart for the spiritual state of Moldovian supermodels.

[28 : 54] I'd like to move to Moldova and start a ministry directed at women who are at least six foot tall weighing somewhere around 120 pounds.

I'm specifically concerned about the blondes in particular. If a young man stood up in church and said that, would any of us believe the best of him?

No, we would not. And now suppose, further suppose, that an older man in the church pulls him aside and suggests to the young man, hey, I want to suggest that your motives may not be as pure as you suspect them to be.

And now further suppose that the young man, upon hearing this, got indignant. How dare you assume my motives, he says. Well, wouldn't that kind of seal the deal for us?

I mean, when he first made his announcement, we were 99% sure that his motives were not pure. But now after his defensiveness, we can be 100% sure this guy's not walking with the Lord through his concern for Mondovian supermodels.

[30 : 12] I bring that up for the following reason. You know, pastors are just men. And pastors are tempted to love power. And pastors are tempted to be jealous of other men's successes.

And pastors can be tempted to overreacting when a zealous young man in their congregation bails and heads out to the Palouse. So if any pastors are listening to this and they've determined to express their concerns about the possible ulterior motives of Moscow, I would just say, well, don't be surprised if a nobody living in Kansas has a few questions for you.

And how you respond to those questions will be informative. Well, that's some thoughts on denominational plank pulling. Obviously, for you individual Christian, this is a verse well worth revisiting.

It by no means prohibits what is in fact a very necessary function within the Christian life, that we watch out for one another and that we help one another and make sure that none of us are encumbered by sin.

That begins first and foremost by learning how to do that with ourselves and what is true of the Christian individual is also true of the Christian institution.

[31 : 36] God bless. Be well. Love you. Bye.