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THE MAN, HIS MINISTRY, AND HIS MOVEMENT: CONCERNS ABOUT THE TEACHINGS OF T. D. JAKES

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SYNOPSIS

The appeal of T.D. Jakes crosses racial, cultural, and economic lines. He boldly addresses deep-felt needs in the American population that are either neglected or avoided by many churches. His charismatic style has drawn as many as 85,000 people to his conferences dealing with women's and men's issues. Many people see Jakes as a compassionate man who understands their deepest problems. He is able to get to the core issues of pain people experience from abuse, whether emotional, physical, or sexual in nature. He not only addresses these issues but gives people ways to deal with their pain and move on with their lives. In addition, he has transferred this knowledge into several best-selling books. Another aspect of Jakes's ministry is the Potter's House in Dallas, a multiracial, nondenominational church with 17,000 members. The church has developed ministries that address many issues ranging from homelessness to mentoring young people.

Jesus commands us not to judge externally but to judge rightly (John 7:24). T.D. Jakes appeals to people externally by addressing their physical and emotional needs. At the same time, many people are asking for help in discerning the right and wrong in his teachings. Several aspects of Jakes's teaching are problematic. For example, he emphasizes the issue of victimization without also emphasizing our sin problem and need for a Savior. He teaches and endorses Word of Faith concepts relating to guaranteed health and wealth. Although he claims to believe in the Trinity, the major problem with T. D. Jakes's teaching centers on Trinitarian theology, which he defines in modalistic or Oneness Pentecostal terms (i.e., there is one God who exists in three manifestations or modes—not three eternal Persons). The definition according to historical Christianity is that there is one God who exists in three co-equal, co-eternal, and co-existent Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In just six years or so, he has taken the church by storm. Charismatic. Dynamic. Compassionate. Successful. Thomas Dexter (T. D.) Jakes is surely all this — he's even been touted as the black Billy Graham. He identifies with your pain, and in this identification he helps you turn your heartache into hope.

Jakes seems to be the ultimate American success story of one who has gone from rags to riches. His influence across the Pentecostal, charismatic, and evangelical world is staggering. His television program, *The Potter's House*, is beamed into more than 500 prisons and viewed by three million people in the United States, England, the Caribbean, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. He has twice been a featured speaker at Promise Keepers stadium events and has co-hosted both the *700 Club* and *Praise The Lord*. He appeared on *Larry King Live* with Pat Robertson, Chuck Colson, and Jerry Falwell on

2 September 1998 to discuss morality and forgiveness issues pertaining to President Clinton. He pastors a church less than three years old that has 17,000 members, with extensive outreach programs to the poor and disadvantaged. His Woman Thou Art Loosed (WTAL) conference during 29–31 July 1999 drew 85,000 women to Atlanta’s Georgia Dome and had 100 satellite transmissions to prisons and detention centers. Presidential front-runner George W. Bush, who has endorsed The Potter’s House’s outreach programs, spoke at the WTAL conference in Atlanta. Jakes has authored 18 books and eight have appeared on national Christian best-seller lists. His 1998 book, *The Lady, Her Lover, and Her Lord*, was number one on *Publishers Weekly’s* Religion Bestsellers list for four months.

Yet, with his personal success and positive impact on others, Jakes’s ministry has not been without controversy. This article will explore his successes and contributions, and whether there is any substance to the criticism he has received.

HIS BACKGROUND: THE “BIBLE BOY” MAKES GOOD

T. D. Jakes was born on 9 June 1957 and grew up as the youngest son in a South Charleston, West Virginia family. His mother, Odith, was a home economics teacher who taught all of her children to cook, clean, and sew. His father, Ernest, was an entrepreneur who had 42 employees working in his janitorial business. As a young boy, Jakes reflected his parents’ work ethic by having a newspaper route, selling Avon products, and selling vegetables from his mother’s garden. He was known in his neighborhood as the “Bible Boy” because he had the habit of preaching to imaginary congregations while always carrying a Bible.¹

When Jakes was 10, his father developed kidney disease, and the boy spent the next few years helping to care for his father. When his mother became ill two months before his graduation, he dropped out of high school to help care for her. He also dropped out of West Virginia State University after a year in order to take a job. He later earned a GED certificate and eventually received bachelor’s and master’s degrees and a doctorate in ministry through correspondence courses.²

Jakes felt called to the ministry at age 17 and began preaching part-time while he was a student at West Virginia State University and while working at a chemical plant. He eventually became part-time music director at the Baptist church in which he grew up. As a part-time pastor, Jakes helped found Greater Emanuel Temple of Faith in 1980 in a storefront in Montgomery, West Virginia with only 10 members. In 1982, he began full-time ministry after the chemical plant where he worked closed and his father died of kidney disease.³ In 1983, he held his first conference (now called “The Bible Conference”) with 80 attendees. In 1990, he moved his ministry to South Charleston. The congregation then grew from 100 members to more than 300.⁴

In 1992, he preached the sermon “Woman Thou Art Loosed” in Sunday school.⁵ This message became his trademark.⁶ One year later, Jakes wrote his first book, also titled *Woman Thou Art Loosed*. In 1993, he also began his weekly television program, *Get Ready with T. D. Jakes*, a program that is now called *The Potter’s House* and airs four times a week. Later that year, he moved his ministry to Cross Lanes, West Virginia. The congregation grew to nearly 1,000 members of all races, including 40 percent Caucasian.⁷ In 1994, Jakes established T. D. Jakes Ministries, the nonprofit organization with currently 150 employees that produces his conferences and television programs, distributes his tapes and videos, and manages his crusades.⁸

T. D. Jakes met his wife, Serita Ann Jamison, while he was a guest speaker at her church. They have been married since 1981 and have five children.

HIS MINISTRY: TRANSFORMING LIVES

In May 1996, Jakes moved his family and 50 other families from West Virginia to establish the Potter’s House in Dallas. The present church is on the 28-acre site where the old Eagle’s Nest Church of television evangelist W. V. Grant had been. This site cost \$3.2 million. The Potter’s House is a multiracial,

nondenominational church with membership rapidly approaching 20,000. As many as 5,000 people attend each of the four three-hour services every weekend.⁹ Many others watch the service on closed-circuit television. A crew tapes and edits the sermon, which is played on cable television and sold after the service. Paul Jones, the ministry's marketing director, told *The Wall Street Journal* that T. D. Jakes Ministries sells about two million videotapes a year, not including conference sales.¹⁰

The church's name comes from Jeremiah 18, where the broken vessel is repaired: "Our ministry is called The Potter's House because we are geared toward mending broken lives, regardless of what color they are."¹¹ The church's congregation is 50 percent male, a high percentage.¹²

The Potter's House's programs include "Ravens Refuge, a homeless ministry; Operation Rehab, an outreach to prostitutes; a GED literacy program; the Transformation Treatment Program for drug and alcohol abusers; an AIDS outreach; and a prison outreach."¹³ It provides bilingual services, translation and interpretation. Even sign language is done bilingually. "Early every Sunday morning, ministers from The Potter's House drive downtown to pick up the homeless people; before church, the homeless get showers and clean clothes, the women, hair-styling and makeup."¹⁴

On 1 March 1998, T. D. Jakes and the Potter's House dedicated Project 2000, a 231-acre tract of land, which will be transformed into the City of Refuge to meet transgenerational needs for rehabilitation, education, and training.

The multiethnic character of Jakes's ministry is certainly praiseworthy. Martin Luther King, Jr., observed that the church is the most segregated major institution in American society.¹⁵ Jakes would like to see racism obliterated: "It's not the color of your skin that will bring deliverance and help from God; it's the contents of your heart."¹⁶ Other churches can learn from this message.

CONFERENCES ON MALE AND FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS

The power of Jakes's impact is particularly evident in his conferences. He gives the yearly "WTAL" and "Manpower" conferences, which attract 70 percent black, 20 percent white, and 10 percent Hispanic.¹⁷ Jakes appeals to women because he addresses their felt needs. He speaks to the pain women are experiencing, whether that pain is a marriage that is falling apart, the loneliness of being a single mother, physical abuse, or any mistreatment. He started the WTAL conferences because he saw this pain while counseling women individually. He sees the conferences as mass counseling sessions. The WTAL conferences and several of his books appeal to the emotions of women. "As he puts it, 25% of women in America have been sexually assaulted in some way before the age of 15, the phenomenon, hardly mentioned in most churches, creates a huge reservoir of pain."¹⁸

Controversial issues have been kept off-limits in most churches. Jakes comes out and addresses sexism as a sin. This is the message women want to hear. The issues that Jakes deals with — rape, battered women, and how to find healing make the difference. He has answers that a lot of people don't find in church.¹⁹

In his books, Jakes explicitly addresses issues with which women struggle. Not only does he speak to struggles that may date back to childhood experiences, but he also offers solutions. He speaks in a compassionate way that convinces women he cares. He points out that some women are victims without being molested. "They were not the direct victims, just the witnesses of a nightmare...They are sad casualties of a cold war. A war that we are losing."²⁰ Jakes goes a step further by telling women to rise above their attitudes: "Until your attitude is corrected, you can't be corrected...You cannot expect the whole human race to move over because you had a bad childhood."²¹ Jakes attributes his success in dealing with women as coming from his own experiences with pain, such as coping with his father's illness and death. In regard to pain, Jakes says, "It will either make you bitter or it will make you better. I wanted to be made better, not bitter."²²

T. D. Jakes appeals to men as well as women. The yearly Manpower conferences teach men how to be men. He mentors men regarding their responsibility toward their families. He teaches that a real man provides for and protects his family. He says there are just as many abused men as women. He tells men

to respect women as God's gift to them. Jakes even purchased subscriptions to *GQ* magazine for the men in his organization to help them learn about manhood.²³ The contents of this magazine would shock Christians, however. In the April–June 1997 issue of *Quarterly Journal*, G. Richard Fisher describes some of the magazine's inappropriateness.²⁴ As Fisher notes, the Bible gives many more and better practical guidelines than *GQ* on manhood and being a godly man (see, e.g., 1 Tim. 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9).

CONCERNS ABOUT THE MAN AND HIS MESSAGE

The apostle John measures our relationship with God by whether we follow or deviate from Christ's doctrine (2 John 9). We are warned not to allow false teachers to teach in our churches nor give them any encouragement (v. 10). And if we do, we share in their evil deeds (v. 11).

T. D. Jakes has shared the platform at times with Benny Hinn, Richard Roberts, Rod Parsley, Joyce Meyer, Rodney Howard-Browne, and Roberts Liardon. Fisher comments concerning Liardon, "Any discerning Christian should want to stay as far away as possible from Liardon who claims he was transported to heaven and there he met Jesus face to face and that he and Jesus had a water fight in the River of Life! Liardon further claims he was shown a building filled with unclaimed body parts (hair, eyes, skin, legs, etc.). This heavenly warehouse of unclaimed body parts is overstocked according to Liardon simply because here on earth believers fail to appropriate them by faith."²⁵

On 28 September 1998 Jakes spoke on *Praise The Lord*, hosted by Paul and Jan Crouch, regarding Kenneth Copeland: "Kenneth Copeland sent a prophecy to me and shared that God was going to send me to the White House. And I was so busy in the Potter's House that the idea of going to the White House was totally absurd to me. But I respected him as a man of God and we just prayed over it and received it."²⁶ The association of T. D. Jakes with such well-known Word of Faith and Counterfeit Revival teachers raises troubling questions about him.

Christian Research Institute (CRI) has been swamped with letters raising questions and concerns about T. D. Jakes. One minister wrote that he shared a Rev. Jakes tape with college and professional athletes. Yet he said he knows very little about the man and asked for help in discerning the right and wrong in his teaching. Jesus commands us to inspect the fruit of leaders' lives and doctrine in order to discern between truth and error (Matt. 7:15–23).

TRINITARIAN OR MODALIST?

A Protestant state corrections chaplain told CRI that "one of the most popular TV evangelists at our institution is T. D. Jakes." He concluded by asking for clarification of Jakes's position on the Trinity. CRI has received two e-mails sent by T. D. Jakes Ministries to people inquiring about that subject. One e-mail response is that "Bishop T. D. Jakes and The Potter's House of Dallas believe there is one God who manifest [sic] Himself in the Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We have never denied the Trinity, and we are disappointed that anyone would misunderstand or misrepresent us."²⁷

The meaning of the term *Trinity*, according to historic Christianity, is that within the nature of the one God co-exist three equal and eternal persons — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. T. D. Jakes Ministries and historic Christianity both use the word *Trinity*, but the meaning of the word appears to be different. Walter Martin taught us that we must scale the language barrier of the cults. We must recognize the reality that unless terms are defined, a semantic jungle will envelope us, making it difficult, if not impossible, to properly contrast orthodox Christianity with teachings outside it.²⁸

On the T. D. Jakes Ministries Web site, an older but still accessible version of their Statement of Faith reads, "There is one God, creator of all things, infinitely perfect, and existing in three Manifestations: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."²⁹ Their current doctrinal statement has been altered somewhat to read: "THREE DIMENSIONS OF ONE GOD (1 John 5:7, Matt. 28:19, 1 Tim. 3:16)" — "We believe in one God, who is eternal in His existence, Triune in His Manifestations, being both Father, Son and Holy Ghost AND that He is Sovereign and Absolute in His authority."³⁰

The position taken by T. D. Jakes Ministries remains problematic. The problem lies in the word “manifestation.” Manifestation is a modalistic term often used by Oneness Pentecostals. *Modalism* views Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as different modes of God’s activity rather than three separate persons.³¹

Jakes was interviewed in August 1998 by *Living by the Word (LBTW)* ministry. This interview was aired on KKLA 99.5 FM in Los Angeles. During this interview, Jakes said, “We have one God, but He is Father in creation, Son in redemption, and Holy Spirit in regeneration.”³² This wording is identical to the Oneness Pentecostal view as described by David K. Bernard, pastor of New Life United Pentecostal Church (UPC), in his book *The Oneness of God*: “A popular explanation of Father, Son and Holy Ghost is that there is one God who has revealed [i.e., manifested] Himself as Father in Creation, Son in redemption and Holy Ghost in regeneration.”³³

In his interview with *LBTW*, Jakes also describes the Trinity as a complex issue, saying, “I’m not sure we can totally hold God to a numerical system.”³⁴ This statement is consistent with his book *Anointing Fall on Me*: “The concept of the Godhead is a mystery that has baffled Christians for years. With our limited minds we try to comprehend a limitless God. How can we explain one God but three distinct manifestations?”³⁵ This idea also reflects Bernard’s Oneness Pentecostal views: “We cannot confine God to three or any other number of specific roles and titles.”³⁶

CRI Coordinator of Research Sam Wall spoke over the telephone with Pastor Lawrence Robinson, Director of Ministry Affairs at the Potter’s House, inquiring about their view of the Trinity. Robinson affirmed that Jakes denies the biblical position of the Trinity, at one point saying that the Roman Catholic Church introduced the concept of three gods. Robinson gave some modalistic illustrations of the Trinity and said that Jakes has always held this position.³⁷ Twice after that, Wall e-mailed Pastor Robinson to confirm the content of their discussion. Robinson never responded. Wall noted in his e-mail, “Should I not hear from you by e-mail, I will assume that these statements by you are correct.”³⁸

In the 1998 *Wall Street Journal* article on Jakes, Lawrence Robinson speaks of knowing T. D. Jakes since he was a young man.³⁹ According to T. D. Jakes Ministries Web site, Elder Lawrence Robinson has been attached to the heart of T. D. Jakes Ministries since 1985 as a faithful partner.⁴⁰

Jakes’s denial of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is further betrayed by his association with the Higher Ground Always Abounding Assembly. He is a leader and elected bishop of this group.⁴¹ CRI spoke with Elder Mike Pearson, an instructor at the Higher Ground Bible Institute. He confirmed that the Assembly has a Oneness view of the Trinity and that T. D. Jakes has been part of this association for about seven years.⁴²

In order to appropriately discern and respond to modalism, it is vital for Christians to understand the Trinity as it is presented in the Bible. James R. White offers three suggestions:

First we need to do some major league education on what the doctrine actually teaches....In the second place, we have to impress on every believer the vital importance of understanding, accepting, and experiencing the truth that God has revealed Himself to be Triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit....Finally, we have to educate, NOT with arrogance or pride, but with a passion and fervor born of love for the truth....Concerned Christians need to voice their disapproval of television networks, ministries, or publishers who tolerate poor theology just to mollify a larger ‘audience.’⁴³

The Trinity is the primary truth of New Testament theology. In his book *Oneness Pentecostals and The Trinity*, former Oneness teacher Gregory A. Boyd convincingly argues that “the denial that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are eternally distinct ‘persons’ in the Godhead indirectly undermines the Christian view of God’s character, God’s revelation, and God’s salvation by grace.”⁴⁴

Oneness believers beg to differ. As noted earlier, modalists, including T. D. Jakes, maintain the view of “one” God revealing Himself in three manifestations. This view has been known throughout history by several different names. One of them is modalistic monarchianism: “A movement which interpreted the Trinity as successive revelations of God — first as Father, then as Son, and finally as Holy Spirit. It began

in the third century."⁴⁵ Modalistic monarchianism emphasized the unqualified intrinsic oneness of God and the full deity of Christ.⁴⁶

Denver Seminary's Dr. Gordon Lewis offered this response to T. D. Jakes's statement about God being Triune in His manifestation: "The revised statement on God revives Sabellian Modalism. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not merely three manifestations of one God in history, three different hats he wears."⁴⁷

Whether it is called modalism, Sabellianism, Oneness, or "Jesus only," this view of the Trinity is heretical. As White observes, "Whatever its name might be, it is a denial of the Trinity based upon the denial of the distinction between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It accepts the truth that there is only one true God, and that the Father, Son, and Spirit are fully God, but it denies that the Bible differentiates between the persons."⁴⁸

OTHER DOCTRINAL CONCERNS

While the biggest concern with Jakes's teaching is the modalistic language he uses in regard to the Trinity, several aspects of his message and ministry are problematic. In a *Wall Street Journal* article, which described Jakes as a country preacher with a multimillion-dollar religious empire, he was quoted as saying, "I am the power and the kingdom and the glory, and I think I kind of like it that way."⁴⁹ Even if he spoke these words in jest, he mocks God, who will not share His glory with another (Isa. 42:8).

Jakes's teaching on sin leaves much to be desired. In a three-hour video broadcast on TBN of his July 1999 WTAL conference in Atlanta, he addressed the women's immediate emotional and social needs, but nothing was said on the issue of sin and the need for a Savior, nor on the atoning death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁵⁰ In *Loose That Man and Let Him Go!* Jakes describes men who have extramarital affairs as doing what they do because they fear confronting unresolved issues with their spouses.⁵¹ He depicts men who carry weapons as living in fear that others will see the frightened little boy hiding behind the big gun.⁵² He characterizes men who beat their wives as little boys having a temper tantrum.⁵³

Jesus goes straight to the heart when He describes adultery (Matt. 5:28) and evil thoughts, murder, fornication, stealing, lying, and blasphemy (Matt. 15:19) for what they are. Jakes teaches that we have problems because we are victims of our environment or circumstances and minimizes the concept of personal sin. Along with victimization, he emphasizes self-empowerment; we can find the power to pull ourselves out of our problems. Yet Paul taught that all have sinned and come up short before God (Rom. 3:23). The way out of our sins is Christ-empowerment, not self-empowerment (Phil. 4:13).

Prosperity teachings stand out more than other Word of Faith teachings in T. D. Jakes's ministry. Jakes is a very wealthy man and enjoys it. The 19 November 1998 *People* magazine describes his \$1.7 million Dallas home, his blue BMW convertible, and his colorful expensive clothing.⁵⁴ (He also drives a Mercedes.) He feels his financial success is a sign of growing economic empowerment for African-Americans. The *Charleston Gazette* published a story that focused on his \$600,000, 16-room Charlotte mansion with its bowling alley and indoor swimming pool. The story didn't accuse him of any wrongdoing, but Jakes felt betrayed, saying that if he couldn't get better press coverage, he'd take his wealth elsewhere.⁵⁵ This may be one reason Jakes moved from Charleston to Dallas.

It's not disturbing that Jakes is wealthy and has this lifestyle, but it's very disturbing that he portrays Jesus as being rich in order to justify his wealth. He describes Jesus as having been rich in order to support His disciples and their families during His ministry. Jakes says the myth of the poor Jesus has to be destroyed because it's holding people back.⁵⁶ Indeed, Jesus Christ owns everything and possesses all power, authority, glory, honor, and majesty. In His earthly life, however, He became poor for our sakes (2 Cor. 8:9; Matt. 8:20). He laid aside His divine prerogatives and died on the cross, owning nothing, like a common criminal.⁵⁷ In fact, archaeological excavations of Nazareth in the 1950s demonstrate that poor agricultural people occupied the village in Jesus' day.⁵⁸

The ministry's doctrinal statement makes it clear that Jakes adheres not only to the doctrine of guaranteed wealth for the believer but also guaranteed health: "We believe that it is God's will to heal and deliver His people today as He did in the days of the first Apostles. It is by the stripes of Jesus that we are healed, delivered and made whole. We have authority over sickness, disease, demons, curses, and every circumstance in life."⁵⁹ This belief is reflected in *Woman Thou Art Loosed!* "Jesus has promised to set you free from every curse of the past. If you have suffered abuse, please know that He will bring you complete healing."⁶⁰ Biblically, however, our faith does not dictate God's will; God's sovereign will dictates our faith (1 John 5:13–14). Healing in the New Testament is not a guarantee, but a benefit of the Atonement. God sometimes answers our prayers with a *yes* and sometimes with a *no*. He always answers our prayers according to His will and for our best. Paul's thorn in the flesh was never removed, even after he asked God three times to remove it (2 Cor. 12:7–10).

In addition to teaching the unbiblical (1 Cor. 12:27–30) classical Pentecostal doctrine that the gift of tongues is the necessary sign of being baptized in the Holy Spirit,⁶¹ T. D. Jakes has been observed "slaying people in the Spirit" on a TBN program that was aired on 6 August 1998. Hank Hanegraaff, in his *Counterfeit Revival*, has written about being "slain in the Spirit": "Despite the pious attribution of this phenomenon to the Holy Spirit as well as the pragmatic addition of 'catchers,' multitudes continue to suffer spiritual, emotional and physical damage from this practice. Some have even died."⁶²

THE NEXT BILLY GRAHAM?

Even well disciplined and discerning Christians find it challenging to differentiate between the truth and error found in Jakes's teachings — let alone the watching secular world. *The New York Times* published an article on 1 January 1999 regarding how America has always had a national evangelist. "Ever since the colonial era, America has had a pre-eminent preacher who played an unofficial role as national evangelist, preaching a simple message of repentance and salvation and drawing vast crowds in the process. For the last 50 years that role has been filled by the Rev. Billy Graham. But at the turn of the century with Mr. Graham now 80, the question arises, Who if anyone can take his place?"⁶³ It is sobering that of the five possible successors to Billy Graham listed, one of them is T. D. Jakes.

There is no denying that T. D. Jakes has many fine leadership qualities, and the social outreaches of his Potter's House church appear quite commendable. But, while sound doctrine is not the only criterion for leadership among Christians (1 Tim. 3:1–13), it is certainly a necessary criterion (Tit. 1:9–11). Do we really want a non-Trinitarian to be the spiritual leader of our country? If the answer to this question is anything but an unequivocal *no*, the future looks dark indeed for the American church.

NOTES

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22. "When the Bishop Speaks, People Listen," *Charisma*, November 1996, 39.
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26. T. D. Jakes discussing Kenneth Copeland, *Praise the Lord*, TBN, 28 September 1998.
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28. Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, anniversary ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), 28.
29. T. D. Jakes Ministries, "Ministry Beliefs," 27 April 1998 (<http://www.tdjakes.net/ministry/believe.html>). In late 1997, CRI Coordinator of Research, Sam Wall, printed out from the T. D. Jakes Ministries Web site an undated doctrinal statement that states, "There is one God...eternally existing in three Persons..." (on file at CRI). A few months later Wall noticed that the statement was changed to "three Manifestations."
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33. David K. Bernard, *The Oneness of God* (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1983), 142.
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