

Florida pastor's boldness overstepped his bounds

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Is a Quran burning the best way to approach the issue? Terry Jones, pastor of a small evangelical church in Gainesville, Fla., has jettisoned into the national spotlight with an affirmative answer to that question. He and his small church had intended to commemorate the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks with an old fashioned book burning.

Jones tentatively called off the plan Thursday, saying he did so after being assured an Islamic center and mosque planned near Ground Zero in New York would be moved.

But before that, earlier in the week, when asked if Jesus would burn the Quran, Jones blurted an unequivocal "Yes!"

Jesus did have his followers arm themselves on their missionary journeys and exercised very aggressive behavior in the Jewish temple, which had become a commercialized marketplace. Jesus also prophesied of the destruction of that temple - a prophecy fulfilled by the Roman Empire in one of the most horrifying military massacres in history. Nonetheless, Pastor Jones' intention to burn the Quran was a mistake rising out of poor theology.

The aggressive actions of Jesus, both verbal and physical, were always aimed at the church itself; judgment begins with the household of God. It was the uniform practice of the writers of the New Testament to correct professing Christians. This doesn't mean Christians have nothing to say vis- -vis the policies and cultures in which they live; the Scriptures do, after all, contain God's infinite wisdom.

But I would no more expect obedience to the Scriptures from a non-Christian than I would expect a stranger's kids to obey me.

Scanning the New Testament, you will find little, if any, attacks or criticisms of the false religions that were pervasive at the time. The early church was surrounded by the influence of the Roman gods

and other false deities who were all but ignored by the writers of the New Testament. And on the rare occasion that we read of these pagan gods, the dispute is generally ignited not by the Christians but against the Christians, by the makers of the shrines and religious paraphernalia. Nothing resembling a book burning is to be found in the New Testament.¹

The Old Testament is a different matter. There are numerous accounts in the Old Testament of kings dismantling houses and structures of idolatry. But these were military actions by kings, not priests. If Gen. David Petraeus (who is not in favor of the Quran burning) thought it would be in the country's best interests to engage in this type of action for military reasons, that would be a different discussion. But Pastor Jones is not a minister of defense; he is a minister in a church.

As a Christian minister myself, I appreciate Pastor Jones' willingness to address religious error. The clergy's lack of boldness to make truth claims is absurd and at times nauseating. One thing I am quite sure Jesus would never countenance would be silence on the part of ministers when it comes to proclaiming the absolute truth of his atoning blood as man's only hope for redemption. But the means by which the truth is to be heralded is not something as incendiary as a book burning.

The word "gospel" means good news. It is the goodness of God that leads men to repentance. Whereas the loving correction of error may be a necessary part of the discussion, the inflammatory nature of what Pastor Jones intended to do does not lend itself to open doors or open hearts. I would be most interested in the opinion of Christian missionaries in the Middle East - would this aid them in their efforts to advance Christ's kingdom?

What Pastor Jones failed to realize is that it is not his office to engage in a military conflict - which is what this book burning would have amounted to. Jesus made that clear distinction when he said that if his kingdom were of this world, his servants would fight. It is the

¹ A book burning in the New Testament was brought to my attention by an attentive reader (Acts 19:19). My mistake for missing that. Of course it was people burning their own books so it is a bit different than the book burning in question. Nonetheless, my oversight. Thanks for the clarification.

office of a minister to bear witness of the truth and let God do what he will with the human heart. Pastor Jones' may say that the book burning was his method of bearing witness to the truth, but attacking error is not the same as proclaiming truth.

According to the Scriptures, God has no fear of error. The Bible tells the false prophet to go ahead and give his false dream or false prophecy. The truth of God's word is like a fire, like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces. As a minister, Pastor Jones is to proclaim the fire of God's truth rather than set fire to the books of errant religion. I appreciate the pastor's boldness, but zeal without knowledge is a dangerous game.

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