

Excuse-Making Hinders Fruitful Discipleship, Ministry

Are you an excuse maker?

When someone makes a compelling case for action or movement, are you prone to start your response with the phrase, "Yes, but..."?

Do you see yourself as an exception to most rules?

Making excuses is at the heart of a troubling spirit that plagues congregational life in America. If it continues unabated, I fear that it will be the death of numerous faith communities.

This epidemic of making excuses and excusing ourselves has many roots. Sometimes it begins with pride, which Scripture tells us is at the heart of our rebellion against God.

We make excuses because we so abhor the humility that awaits us otherwise. Without our excuses, we would be exposed as the fallen creatures we actually are.

I have met many people and a few congregations who engage in excuse-making simply because they have never seriously considered the possibility that they may be wrong.

Rather than honestly consider changing to meet the reality of a new and different world, they refuse to entertain the notion that they might need to rethink how they go about their business. Sadly, such pride almost inevitably invites a great fall.

Another motivation for our excuse-making is our guilt. Owning up to our shortcomings opens up the possibility that we may need to make wholesale changes, and who wants to do that?

When a congregation becomes a habitual excuse-maker, they tend to hide behind a façade of flimsy reasons that shield them from their own guilt.

I recently pointed out to a congregation that they had consistently and repeatedly fired or forced out a series of pastors and other staff members over the course of 30 years. The pattern was clear and telling.

Their response? “We’ve just had bad luck with ministers.” “We seem to attract poor quality clergy who bring this upon themselves.” “You just can’t get good help anymore.”

At no point did anyone on the team entertain the thought that the blame might rest with the congregation and their unhealthy way of dealing with conflict.

Excuse makers generally are experts at blaming and scapegoating. In their unceasing efforts to avoid responsibility, they have no qualms about assigning motives to others, engaging in character assassination, and creating caricatures of those they disagree with.

What are we to do about this insidious illness that plagues 21st-century Christianity?

I’m reminded of a story from 1952, at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.

An invitation went out to those fortunate enough to qualify for such a thing. At the end of the formal note on the fine parchment were these words: “All excuses ceasing.”

The implication, of course, was that there is nothing more important than this event. Don’t even bother with your excuses.

The invitation of God to be about his kingdom agenda is larger and more expansive than we have allowed ourselves to imagine. Our pride and guilt combine to blind us to the possibilities that await us if we say yes to the invitation.

In the place of habitual excuse-making, what if we instead became a people notorious for our humility?

Beginning with a profound awareness of our shortcomings seems to be a prerequisite to being used mightily by God.

Across the pages of Scripture comes a consistent message: God uses the imperfect, the broken-hearted, the rejected, the ones who are the misfits and those who know the depths of their own sinfulness.

I have started saying something like this to congregations who are awakening to the challenge of this new era: "The only churches that I think have a chance are those who have been broken, biblically speaking. God will only use those who are humble and have given up the idea that they are bright enough and savvy enough to pull this off on their own."

When we cease making excuses, we begin down the path of humble discipleship.

One of my Baptist heroes is Lewis Shuck, who grew up in Virginia and was eventually appointed as a missionary at First Baptist of Richmond.

In the 1830s, he and his wife, Henrietta, journeyed to Macao and began their ministry there. The first American missionaries to China, they established the Henrietta School, which is still in existence and ministering today in Hong Kong. I visited their website this week.

In 1835, at the meeting of the Baptist Triennial Convention, he was deeply moved by the words of the minister, and at the time of the offering, instead of a monetary gift, he wrote three words on a slip of paper and placed it in the offering plate.

Those three words launched him on a lifetime of adventure and fulfillment. Those words? "I give myself."

No excuses. Just the simple commitment to be God's servant without reservation. That is the kind of person, and church, God can work wonders with.

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