



Excuses – a refuge from responsibility

The Bible records a sobering parable of the Lord. A man provided a great supper at his own expense and invited many people to attend. However, his gracious invitations were rejected. “And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come” (Lk 14:18-20). This parable serves to illustrate among other things, how inventive and spontaneous we can be to avoid an invitation. That same resourcefulness and spontaneity is displayed when we are invited to accept God’s invitation to be saved from the judgment of God because of our sin. “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth” (Isa 45:22). “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). We are quick to employ a range of “excuses” in our attempts to deny this clear divine invitation and warning. Our excuses may appear original, but the Bible anticipates every one of them and informs us in no uncertain terms that “there is no new thing under the sun” (Ecc 1:9).

The plea of innocence

The first refuge of the fallen heart and mind is a familiar school-boy defense. “It weren’t my fault Sir – he made me do it!” Despite its charming school-yard naivety, the claim that “it was not I but another imposing upon my will,” is a plea that is often presented in sophisticated legal defenses - **non est factum** (it is not my deed). Blame is instinctively shifted to others with the unabashed purpose of denying responsibility. The world saw something of it in the *Nuremberg Defense* after WWII, which sought to excuse the terrible atrocities visited upon the Jews by those who claimed they were “just following superior orders.” At the Fall responsibility was deflected to God and the woman by Adam. “And the man [Adam] said, the woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat” (Gen 3:12). We know that this plea was not accepted by God and Adam died physically and spiritually on the day he ate of that forbidden fruit. In the end Adam had to admit his guilt, “I did eat” - **mea culpa**, “it was **my** fault.”

But that was Adam we say! What he did and claimed has nothing to do with me; I am therefore innocent. And so we enter a plea before God of **mea innocentia** (I am innocent). However, this *seemingly* legitimate plea is denied by Romans 5:12. “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” It means that every one of Adam’s race partook of his fallen nature and is a guilty sinner in the sight of God. In Adam therefore all die (physically and spiritually) because all sinned in Adam. “For as in Adam all die” (1 Cor 15:22). We have then the clear indictment of the Word of God; that all of us are condemned in Adam – born in sin. “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps 51:5). “As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one” (Rom 3:10).

The plea of ignorance

While the plea of innocence seeks to deny the fact that man has a *fallen* conscience and is responsible for his deeds, the plea of ignorance attempts to *excuse* his conscience. This is another appeal we have all used at one time or another, whether as a child helping ourselves to delicacies from the larder or as an adult apprehended for driving above the speed limit. “I know what I did was wrong, but I was unaware of the law against it.” And so the excuse or defense - “I did not know” - is placed before the judge, be it a parent or magistrate. It will be met and defeated however by the maxim – **ignorantia non excusat** (ignorance is no excuse).

When standing before the Eternal Judge, many will enter the plea that they are indeed sinners - but that they did not know God’s mind or His will on the matter. The OT makes it plain however, that man is *not* ignorant of God and His ways. “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork” (Ps 19:1). Creation is a divine revelation as to the existence of God, of His supremacy and of man’s responsibility to Him. It is used by Paul in the NT to underpin the truth, that a plea of ignorance as to the existence of God

and man's responsibility to Him cannot be used to enter a plea of ignorance and so overturn condemnation in Adam. "For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that **they are without excuse**" (Rom 1:20). The existence and majesty of God is to be acknowledged in creation. We are therefore required to bow before Him and seek Him, "for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him" (Heb 11:6). Observe carefully, that Paul is speaking to the *fallen man* in Adam. The judgment, that *fallen* man is "without excuse," refutes the falsehood that fallen man is incapable of exercising moral responsibility. The Fall never removed man's conscience. It in fact made his conscience alert to that which is right and wrong – for he then knew of good and evil (Gen 3:22). Away then with the Calvinist idea of total depravity. It serves Satan and swells his ranks by encouraging fallen man to believe that he is not responsible to God for his thoughts and deeds, and so it is futile to seek Him and must therefore await divine election for salvation. Peter speaks about fallen man as being "willingly ignorant." "For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water" (2 Pet 3:5). Fallen man is deliberately ignorant of God's righteousness, seen in that he *chooses* to establish his own righteousness before God, rather than submitting to the righteousness of God (Rom 10:3).

The plea for lenience

Again we can all identify with the protest, "I am guilty, but my condemnation should be overturned because of my upstanding character and good works." In this case we don't try to deny or excuse our fallen conscience, but seek to *appease* it. "I have done my best – my conscience is clear!" When cataloguing "our best," our fallen hearts and minds again display their immense propensity for invention and for improvisation. The list is seemingly endless and includes good works such as "my regular church attendance," "my charitable efforts," "my love for friends and family" as well as "my lawful conduct." Many in error cite their baptism – whatever the form, as the principal cleanser of their conscience. Agnostics will expect that God will have "mercy" upon them because they have conducted an "earnest enquiry" into His existence. Such pleas in reality are put before God in order to assuage or avert His judgment. But they are devised by fallen hearts and placed before God by sin-stained hands.

The testimony of Scripture is clear as to the impotence of all our efforts to avert the condemnation of God. "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away" (Isa 64:6). Again, an OT principle is taken up by Paul in his treatise on the Gospel and justification in Romans. "What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works" (Rom 4:1-6). We can add further testimony to this unambiguous principle from the epistle to the Ephesians and from the epistle to Titus. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph 2:8-9). "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Tit 3:5).

The witness of Scripture is clear and we are all required to bow to it. Our pleas of innocence, of ignorance and of lenience before God because we are "good" and "upright" are of no avail. For all who neglect so great salvation, there can be no **plea bargaining** with God in regard to the *charge* of being guilty in sin - or in regard to the *sentence* imposed because of it.

"I need no other argument,
I need no other plea,
It is enough that Jesus died,
And that he died for me" (Eliza Hewitt)