

Why This Pastor Publicly Apologized From the Pulpit

Last weekend I apologized to our church—publicly. It wasn't dramatic or teary or reminiscent of a Jim and Tammy Faye meltdown. I hadn't stolen money or lied to our elders or cheated on my wife. But I did sin publicly. And not just publicly. I sinned publicly to my church family. I tend to land on the philosophy of public sin, public apology. There is a model for this in Galatians 2 in which Paul corrects Peter publicly because of Peter's public sin of capitulating to Jewish leaders. Galatians 2 is the gospel version of the WWE smackdown. Paul body-slams Peter over his hypocrisy—in front of everyone. It's painful to read. I can say with experience, it's painful to be in the middle of it too.

A Varsity Apologizer

This is not my first public apology. I have some practice. A few years ago, my mouth got ahead of my head during a weekend sermon. In the heat of passion, though on purpose and with intent, I used a fairly colorful word to prove a point. It was a stunt. The nano-second after the word left my mouth I knew I had done damage to the message of Jesus and to the office of pastor. On Monday morning, I was met by an older woman in our church who gently brought correction to my heart and behavior. The next Sunday I apologized, repented and promised our young church that I could do better. And generally, I do better. But not always.

Last Sunday I apologized, not for a word spoken, but because I lacked grace in my presentation. I was aggressive, combative even. I set myself up as an expert and in some places (you can listen to it here), I might have well shouted, "Come at me, Brah!" Most of our church didn't even notice. Maybe they were sleeping. Most probably didn't notice because they are super

generous towards my frailties. I finished the sermon, and I was happy with the content. I would preach it again tomorrow, in fact. But just because my content was good, didn't mean my presentation was. I lacked grace. Church ended, and I just wanted to move past what I had done. Interestingly, not one person called me or showed up at my office Monday morning. In fact, I received more praise for that particular sermon than I can remember in the recent past. But still, I knew I had done something wrong.

I woke up at 2 a.m. Tuesday morning, and I couldn't go back to sleep. Gently I felt the impression of the Holy Spirit that I had to make things right. Jon, repent. That's what I heard from the Holy Spirit. No megaphone from heaven, mind you. But still a clarity that most Jesus folk understand.

Sunday morning came, and I stood before our community and told my story—replayed my very public transgression and then asked for their forgiveness. Most told me they were grateful for what I had done. Many still don't understand. I've had multiple conversations like this: "Jon, no one was offended? Nobody called you? The elders didn't sit you down? I don't get it. What are you apologizing for?"

Who Was I Apologizing To?

It got me thinking about how to answer my friends in a way that makes sense. Here it is: All offense is against God first. Every time we sin against people or ourselves or in marriage or with our mouths, it's first a sin against God. And sometimes when we sin, even when we sin against people, they don't know about it. And because they don't know about it, they don't feel they are owed an apology. But the Holy Spirit always knows. He felt my offense. It hurt him to see me treat His church with contempt. So He spoke to me, and I responded the best way I knew how.

The Holy Spirit didn't confront me publicly for my public sin.

Gratefully, He did publicly pay the price for that sin on a cross; He sheltered me from the shame of it. But still, an apology was due, and I gave it. I then preached my heart out, and the church didn't give my misstep a second thought.

Our church continues to amaze me with their grace and hopefulness.

Thank you, Vineyard, you are a gift to me. {eoa}

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