

TAKING CHRISTMAS SERIOUSLY

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Within sociology, there is a theory of human behaviour called "*Attribution Theory*." In a nutshell, Attribution Theory asks the question, "How do I know what I think until I see what I do?"

If you fail a test at school, you look for an attribution—a reason or an explanation—to explain why you failed the test. We can explain our failure with reasons like, "That teacher is a lousy teacher." "I was sick the day they reviewed the material for the exam." "I'm stupid." "I should have studied more."

The reason we pick depends on the other reasons we've made about ourselves in the past. If, in the past, we have thought of ourselves as smart, then we're not likely to now choose to attribute our failure to stupidity. If that particular teacher always gave us good marks in the past, we're not likely to chalk this failure up to a lousy teacher.

According to Attribution Theory, we see ourselves doing something, we try to find an explanation as to why we did what we did, and if we like the explanation (or attribution), we decide that's who we really are.

If your kids tell you they love you, you have a number of explanations to choose from: Maybe they're telling you this because you're a great parent; maybe they're telling you this because they want you to give them some money to go to the mall or stay out late at a party. So it is that you pick the one that seems most like all the other attributions you've chosen for yourself; you pick the one you like best.

So it is that we find ourselves wading through the Christmas season again. I had an office Christmas party to attend last night. I missed my wife's office party last weekend. I know that many of you are in the throws of decorating houses, or offices, baking cookies and slices, buying gifts, addressing Christmas cards, writing notes, figuring out who's been naughty or nice, stocking the liquor cabinet, sending out invitations for parties or deciding whether to accept invitations for parties.

It's a busy time and we are naturally trying to figure out why we are so busy. Why did we buy into this busyness? What is our explanation for why we are running around in such a frantic and frenetic way?

There are a number of reasons available to us: We're hard working; if we didn't take Christmas so seriously, people might think of us as lazy.

We're team players; if we slacked off at Christmas, people might think of us as spoilsports, Scrooges: "Ba, humbug."

We care about our friends and family; if we didn't make sure that there was a dump truck of presents under the tree, people might think that we didn't care about them, or that we were cheap or stingy.

This is just a partial list, but there are many other reasons and attributions we use to try and explain why we are so busy at Christmas.

Do we enjoy being this busy? I don't think we do. In fact, I'm convinced of it, and let me prove that to you.

Do we ever complain about the things we enjoy? Do you ever say to yourself or your friends, "I wish my husband would just cooking supper and cleaning up the house every night. I wish, he'd just stop doing things for me!" Or do you ever say to yourselves, "She always wants to cuddle with me and rub my back after a tough day at the office; I can't stand it anymore!"

Do your kids ever say, “Not another A on my report card? What will my parents think?” Or how about this one, “I’m sick of always winning our hockey games, we should be entitled to lose a game now and again!”

Do we ever hear such complaints? No, and why? Because we never complain about the things we enjoy.

Now go up to someone after church and ask him or her if they’re keeping busy. If they really enjoy Christmas, the answer you should get is, “No! This is fun!”

Instead, the answer you *will* get is a litany of all the things they are busy doing and why they can’t even find the time to think and how they don’t know if they are ever going to be ready for Christmas or get all the things done that are on their to do list.

So, I ask you again, do we enjoy being this busy?

Christmas wasn’t always this way. A century ago, Christmas was a much more folksy, non-commercial and less busy season. Don’t believe me, go and read the book, *Unplug the Christmas Machine*¹. Before 1933, people didn’t even start preparing for Christmas until well into December. It was in 1933 that American business leaders persuaded Franklin Roosevelt, then President of the United States to move the Thanksgiving holiday one week earlier in hope of persuading people to start their Christmas shopping in November.²

Let me offer you some attributions—some excuses if you will—that will allow you to feel OK with a simpler, less complicated Christmas:

¹ Jo Robinson, Jean C. Staeheli, *Unplug the Christmas Machine: A Complete Guide to Putting Love and Joy Back into the Season*. 1991 William Morrow & Company, New York.

² <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/thanksg.html>

- “I’m using this Advent season to get in touch with my spiritual needs and values.”
- “I’m not busy this Advent because I’m in touch with the true meaning of Christmas, and it doesn’t involve money or work.”
- “I believe Christmas is about God’s love for us; if it isn’t about love, it doesn’t belong in my holiday plans.”
- “We have enough stuff in our family, let’s stop shopping and start living.”
- “I’d rather give something good to my world, than something I don’t need to me.”
- “Christmas isn’t about me.”
- “My gift to my family and friends is to be more faithful to Christ. That’s why I’m praying and meditating on Scripture more in this advent season.”

If we’re not happy with how we live our Christmas seasons, then maybe we need a new vision for ourselves.

Advent is a time of preparation, but it’s not preparation in a frantic sense. The colours we’ve chosen for advent are blues and purples. They are muted colours to convey a sense of reflection and serenity.

The hymns we sing often have a minor key and a slower tempo. They are beautiful but not boisterous or exuberant.

The lessons we read are often contemplative and shrouded in mystery and longing. They point to what we can become if we slow down so that we can hear the quiet whispering voice of God’s Spirit speaking to us and communing with us.

So if you always answer “busy” when people ask you how you are, you don’t have to feel guilty about it anymore. Just pick an attribution or reason and do

something about it. It doesn't mean that you're not taking Christmas seriously; it just means you're taking it *more* seriously.