

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

The power of an apology

Presented by Graham Agnew

It was one of the biggest Church scandals of my lifetime: sex...lies...video? (I'm not sure) –but there was certainly money involved: A LOT OF MONEY! And the Minister at the centre of the scandal was originally sentenced to 45 years imprisonment, although he only served about 8 years in the end. I'm referring to the rise and fall of Jim Bakker, the famous tele-Evangelist who fell from grace in the late 80's. Following his release from prison in the early 90's, Jim Bakker wrote a book, the title of which is quite striking. Simply: "I Was Wrong". What a contrast to the sort of books normally written by notorious criminals, who do everything possible to justify their actions and rationalise their misdemeanours.

Despite his catastrophic fall, Bakker was at least prepared to admit openly and honestly he had made huge mistakes. He was sorry for his actions and he apologised. A genuine apology is a powerful component in the process of rebuilding broken relationships.

There are many expressions of apology in the Bible, but one of the most powerful is in Psalm 51 and the author is King David. In verse 3 of this Psalm he says: "I recognise my faults; I am always conscious of my sins" He's saying, I was wrong to do what I did. It's an admission of guilt and really an apology to God and (if they ever got to read it), an apology to the people directly affected by David's transgression.

In this case, the parents & family of a guy called Uriah would have been very interested in the apology, as would the parents, friends and family of a young woman named Bathsheba. After all, they were the ones whose lives were shattered by the terrible things David had done. And what was his sin? Well, for those familiar with the Old Testament stories, you'll recall David is the guy who saw Bathsheba bathing on a roof top, decided he wanted to have a sexual relationship with her and arranged for her husband (who served in David's army) to be killed in battle.

It was an ingenious plan and one which resulted in David achieving his lustful objective – but one also resulting in pain and anguish for a lot of people. Ultimately, under strong conviction by God, David saw the gravity of his sin, admitted unequivocally he was wrong and under the inspiration of the Spirit, penned a Psalm which expresses some of the most advanced theological thinking in the entire Old Testament, if not the Bible. Take verses 10-12 for instance: "Create a pure heart in me O God and put a new and loyal spirit in me. Do not banish me from your presence; do not take your Holy Spirit away from me. Give me again the joy that comes from your salvation and make me willing to obey you".

I was wrong... Three simple words which, if expressed with heartfelt sincerity, can work miracles in the area of reconciliation and harmony. Stephen Covey, author of *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* says: "It takes a great deal of character strength to apologise quickly, out of one's heart rather than out of pity. A person must have a deep sense of security in fundamental principles and values in order to genuinely apologise."

And, of course, the key word here is "genuine". Most of us can mouth the words "I apologise" – we can readily say "Look, I've apologised, what more do you want?" or "What more can I do?" We've all been on the receiving end of that kind of apology and in our less effective moments, we've all delivered that sort of

message to someone with whom we're upset, usually with very little impact. For an apology to have effect, it must come from our heart and must be borne out of a sense of deep regret. That's why David's was so effective!

Over the years, I've spoken to people who would love to receive a genuine apology from:

- An abusive father or mother
- An unfaithful partner
- From a rebellious son or daughter
- From a boss who relentlessly put them down and made them feel inferior

I've spoken to people who crave an apology from a person who's grieved them deeply...who's let them down badly...who's upset them in a way they never could have imagined. In some cases it's a relative, a friend, a colleague...even a church member. I'm usually talking to these people in a pastoral setting where they are telling me about the emotional and spiritual struggle they have experienced (in some cases, over a long period of time) in the absence of that apology. Oh, they may have heard the words: "I'm sorry, I apologise, I was wrong" – but they're yet to see much evidence the apology is genuine and heartfelt.

That's because there's more to an apology than simply saying: "I'm sorry or I was wrong". In fact, the authentic apology involves a number of essential components – and I'm not suggesting every apology necessarily requires each of these. For instance, some apologies are very minor: You accidentally bump someone as you're getting out of the lift or you forget to pick up a Snickers bar for the kids when you're at the supermarket. Or you say "skim milk" instead of "soy" when ordering a friend's coffee. I mean, that's trivial stuff.

But as the severity of the pain and grief caused by our actions grows, so does the need for more of these essential components to be present. The first involves expressing regret. This is the baseline for any apology and involves those three magic words: "I am sorry..." In Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son one of the motivating factors causing the young man to return home was regret: "Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against You. I regret doing that...I regret the hurt I've caused you". That's what he was saying. Saying the words: "I'm sorry" is relatively easy – we all do that many times in any given week (depending on how often we upset people). But there is another essential component to the genuine apology and it's accepting responsibility.

International TV celebrity Oprah Winfrey surprised her audience back in January 2006 by opening her program with these words: "I made a mistake". She was apologising for defending an author by the name of James Frey, who had fictionalised many parts of his memoirs in a book called "A Million Little Pieces". Her defence of this man had alienated many of her supporters. She continued, "by defending Mr Frey" I left the impression that the truth does not matter and I'm deeply sorry for that because that's not what I believe". By accepting responsibility for her actions, Oprah restored respect among many who had previously been offended.

Accepting responsibility for our actions certainly adds weight to an apology because it means we include words like: I know what I did was wrong, I could try to excuse myself, but there IS no excuse. Pure and simple, what I did was selfish and wrong.

Or... I made a big mistake. At the time I didn't think much about what I was doing but looking back, that's the problem: I wish I'd thought before I acted. What I did was wrong. Are there people from whom you would like to hear those words? Are there people known to you who need to hear those words from you? In

Psalm 51:4 David took responsibility: “I have sinned against you and done what you consider evil”. It takes courage to make an apology like that.

Making restitution can be a crucial factor in the genuine apology. The dictionary describes restitution as “a giving of something as an equivalent for what has been lost or damaged”. In one of his books, the American author Andy Stanley writes: “A willingness to do something to try to make up for the pain I have caused you is evidence of a true apology. A voice inside us says: I ought to make amends for what I’ve done.

Following his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus saw how evil he’d been in ripping illegal tax payments from his fellow countrymen. He announced he would repay fourfold any amount he’d taken illegally and on top of that, give half his wealth to the poor. It’s all recorded in Luke 19. Zacchaeus was saying I’m sorry, I was wrong and I want to make restitution. An appropriate question when seeking to make restitution might be: I know I’ve hurt you deeply and I feel like I should do something to make up for the hurt I’ve caused. Can you give me a suggestion? It would be a very hardened person indeed who would not respond positively to a question like that, if it’s expressed with sincerity.

Of course, genuine repentance is another important part of a true apology. There is a world of difference between saying: “I’m sorry if how I act offends you – I don’t mean to hurt you”. And: “I’m acting inappropriately and I can see it upsets you. I’ll change my behaviour”. Someone has said: an apology informed is good, but an apology performed is better. To simply say: “I’d like to apologise” is no more a genuine apology than saying I’d like to lose weight and then expecting to become slimmer. The words have to be backed up by actions. On the day of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2, Peter delivered a powerful sermon to the assembled crowd who, 7 weeks before, had been responsible for the death of Jesus. “What must we do? Was the cry from the crowd at the end of the message” And what was Peter’s response: “Repent and be baptised”.

The last component to a genuine apology I want to highlight is requesting forgiveness. Now that takes courage, it means swallowing pride, it’s risky and there are no guarantees, (initially at least) that forgiveness will be forthcoming. But requesting forgiveness is absolutely necessary to complete the genuine apology process. It’s the step that indicates we are sincere in our desire to see the relationship restored. It’s one thing to ask for forgiveness (that’s hard enough), but it can be even harder to say: “I forgive you...”

“I’m sorry”, “I apologise” are the words we all like to hear, but they’re also the words we find hard to say – especially when we consider there needs to be a lot more to a genuine apology, than merely the words. There needs to be action: Restitution, repentance and the request for forgiveness...just to name a few.

“Father help us to courageously and intentionally apologise when the need arises – and to do so with heart-felt sincerity...” Amen.