

Don't Apologize!

It is time to say it clearly—so that no one may misunderstand: the Bible nowhere advises or allows (and certainly doesn't command) apology.

Yet, in spite of this fact, Christians (and even Christian counselors) somehow seem to be addicted to apologizing and advising counselees to "go apologize" to others whom they have wronged. To all such, I have one piece of advice: Stop it!

"Well, what on earth is wrong with apologies?"

Fundamentally, two things.

I

An apology is an inadequate, humanistic substitute for the real thing. Nowhere do the Scriptures require, or even encourage, apologizing. To say "I'm sorry" is a human dodge for doing what God has commanded. And (as we shall see) since it is man's substitute for God's requirement (and has all but replaced that requirement), it has caused a great number of problems in the church. By replacing the biblical requirement for dealing with estrangement, it has allowed estrangement in the church to continue unchecked.

"What is this biblical requirement that has been replaced?"

Forgiveness.

"Forgiveness?"

Yes. I shall not now develop this point by discussing the numerous passages that speak of Christian forgiveness. Instead, I shall simply refer you to other treatments of the subject.¹

As long as Christians continue to say to those they have wronged, "I'm sorry" (or words to this effect), instead of "I sinned; will you forgive me?" and as long as they receive the natural response, "Oh, that's all right" (or something similar), the real solutions to the many difficulties that could have been reached through forgiveness will continue to be by-passed. The church will labor under the burden of resentments and bitterness on the part of its members.

"Why do you say that?" you may wonder. Let me explain; and that explanation leads to a second point—apology is wrong, not only because it is man's inadequate substitute for God's revealed method of righting sour interpersonal relationships, but (as such),

apology elicits an inadequate response. When one asks, "Will you forgive me?" he has punted; the ball has changed hands, and a response is now required of the one addressed. The onus of responsibility has shifted from the one who did the wrong to the one who was wronged. Both parties, therefore, are required to put the matter in the past. And, the proper response (Luke 17:3) is, "Yes, I will." Like God's forgiveness ("Your sins and iniquities I will remember against you no more"), human forgiveness is a *promise* that is *made* and *kept*.

When one person says, "I forgive you," to another, he promises:

1. "I'll not bring this matter up to you again"
2. "I'll not bring it up to others"
3. "I'll not bring it up to myself (i.e., dwell on it in my mind) "

The response, "Yes, I'll forgive you," then, is a promise that entails quite a commitment—one to which the forgiven brother (and God) may hold him, and one that (if kept) will lead to forgetting the wrong (not forgive and forget, but forgive to forget) and re-establishing a new, good relationship between the parties involved. So, an apology is an inadequate substitute because (a) it asks for no such commitment, and (b) gets none.

An apology keeps the ball in one's own possession. The other party is required to do nothing about it (and usually doesn't). To say "I'm sorry" is, you see, nothing more than an expression of one's own feelings. To say, "I have wronged you," and then to ask, "Will you forgive me?" is quite another thing.

Therefore, counselors (in advising counselees²) must be quite clear about this matter. When they are, and when a proper understanding of this matter once again begins to permeate the Christian church, many of the current difficulties we are experiencing will disappear. Let's do our part in hastening that day.

1. See *The Christian Counselor's Manual*, pp. 63-70, 88, 361; *Christian Living in the Home*, ch. 3.

2. See an earlier, spelled-out explanation of how to do this in the article entitled, "Failure in Counseling."

Adams, Jay E. Update on Christian Counseling,
vol. one, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian + Reformed,
1974.