

# How Sorry Are We?

by Greg Albrecht

## A SIGN OF WEAKNESS?

Were we to take our cues from Hollywood on the topic of being sorry, apologizing and seeking forgiveness, we might remember the message from a 1949 Western movie titled “She Wore a Yellow Ribbon” in which John Wayne’s character says, “Never apologize and never explain—it’s a sign of weakness.”

Or, if we persist in consulting movie “wisdom,” we might remember the line, “Love means never having to say you’re sorry,” from the classic 1970 tale “Love Story.”

With “apologies” to John Wayne, the gospel of Jesus Christ teaches us that making amends is incredibly important. As Christ-followers grow in Christ, we learn to apologize more readily. The gospel is about “no-matter-what” love—it’s about forgiveness over and over again. That teaching turns our world upside down.

With “apologies” to the classic movie “Love Story,” love means always being willing to admit our shortcomings and sins, and it means regularly saying we are sorry.

- If you have ever received a genuine apology, you know how healing a genuine apology can be.

**Love DOES mean having to say you’re sorry... regularly!**

- If you have ever given a genuine apology, you know how difficult it is to give a genuine apology.

Even when people use the word “sorry,” how often do they really mean it? When we say “sorry,” how sorry are we?

Apologies humble us—when we apologize, our image of who we are is diminished. A true apology means giving something up. It means we might lose something material or financial and it means that our pride may be damaged.

That’s why it is far easier to live in denial—to reconstruct reality and rewrite history about what we believe, which is nothing but a convenient lie about what really happened.

*It is far easier for us to accuse another person of being a sorry excuse for a human being than it is for us to seriously consider our own flawed and broken condition.*

## COUNTERFEIT APOLOGIES

While we all yearn to hear **authentic apologies**, we often hear **counterfeit apologies—counterfeit apologies** are no apology at all. Here are just three examples of **counterfeit apologies**:

- “Oh, you were upset by something I said? I was only kidding.”

Even a slip of the tongue can often reveal a speaker’s true motive or intention. In Matthew 12:34, Jesus said that the mouth speaks what is already present in the heart.

How sorry can someone be if all they can say is, “I was only kidding,” when someone lets them know how much their words hurt?

- “I’m sorry if you misunderstood what I was trying to say—that wasn’t what I meant.”

This lame justification has someone shifting blame back to us because according to them, it was our fault for not understanding them as we should have. It is a far, far different thing to say “I’m sorry, I probably did not explain and express myself adequately.”

- “I’m sorry IF I offended you. I apologize IF you got the wrong impression from something I said or did.”

Notice how all three “non-apology apologies” are actually subtle accusations that the other person somehow failed. “Non-apology apologies” are classic exercises in blame-shifting, a backhanded sorry excuse that lays blame totally on the person who was so sensitive they were offended.

A powerful illustration for such sorry excuses for

apologies comes from a comic strip called “Pearls Before Swine.” The rat in the comic strip says to his friend, the pig, “I’m going to start apologizing to all the people I have insulted by telling them ‘I’m sorry that you were offended.’”

His friend the pig asks him, “Is that a real apology?”

The pig responds, “No. That’s what’s so great about it. It allows me to retain the impact of the original insult while tacking on the implied bonus insult of ‘You are an insensitive ninny.’”

Vague and incomplete apologies are meaningless because the person who was wronged realizes that the person who caused the offense and pain takes no responsibility for causing it.

## HOW SORRY ARE WE REALLY?

**Counterfeit apologies** are essentially non-sorrowful apologies. **Counterfeit apologies** use the word “sorry” but reveal that the offender is really not sorry at all.

Saying “I’m sorry” without a genuine acknowledgment of wrongdoing is no apology at all. A Christ-centered apology involves repentance—and repentance involves an acceptance of responsibility for what was said or done and a determination to change one’s behavior. Apologizing without repenting can transform what masquerades as an apology into an insult.

The person who says, “I’m sorry IF I offended you” or “I’m sorry IF you got the wrong impression about something I said or did” may well be arrogant and filled with pride—there is nothing of a Christ-centered humility in such a statement, but rather there is a lack of remorse, a denial of being wrong and an unstated but added insult that the person making the non-apology is superior to the person who was so sensitive that they were offended.

People who don’t truly repent may use the word “sorry,” but they are actually proclaiming that they were not wrong at all. They shift the blame to the person they hurt or injured by accusing them of being overly sensitive.

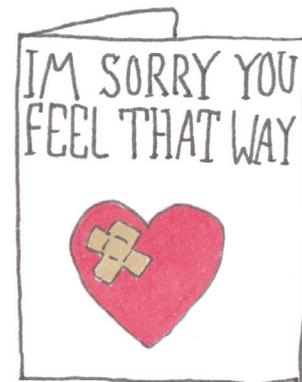
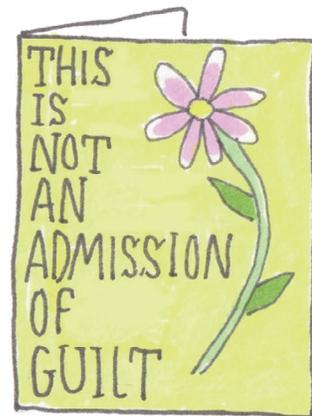
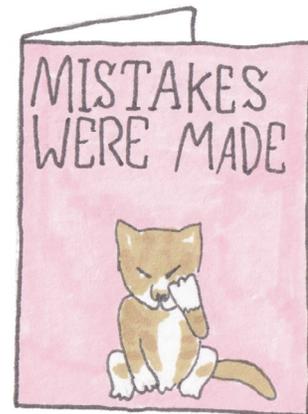
## DENY AND DEFEND!

One of the difficulties surrounding apologizing concerns the highly litigious society in which we live. When we have a car accident, lawyers and insurance agents advise against admitting we were in the wrong. Doctors are told by hospitals, insurance companies and malpractice attorneys never to admit they make a mistake. Never say you were wrong. **Deny and Defend!**

**Deny and Defend** is not only a tactic used when there might be financial implications—it goes to the human condition. Our nature, as humans, is to deny and defend.

Jesus fully realizes that in our flesh, we will fight with every fiber of our being to avoid giving an apology. We’re tempted to offer half-hearted non-apologies, serve up self-justifications and attempt to transfer blame.

# NON-APOLOGY CARDS



Twitter.com/nonapologycards  
Art: Jamie & Thomas

# "OWNING IT" – A GOOD APOLOGY:

I AM SORRY.  
(no buts)

IT'S MY FAULT  
(full stop)

HOW CAN I  
MAKE IT  
RIGHT?

Jesus also knows how deeply we desire others to apologize to us, and how helpful and healing authentic apologies can be. Knowing that, he has us imagine bringing an offering in a religious setting, then realizing we have left some hurt or harm in our wake. In Matthew 5:23-24, he says, "Stop right there. First go and be reconciled" (paraphrase).

As Christ-followers, we have two commandments: 1) to love God with all that we are, and 2) to love our neighbors as ourselves. To apologize and mean it—to genuinely say "I'm sorry"—is a key aspect of those two imperatives.

Knowing we are healed and reconciled through others' apologies, how can we love our neighbors as ourselves if we avoid offering an apology ourselves?

How can we love God and love our neighbors as ourselves if we offer only counterfeit apologies and lame excuses or deny what we have said or done? How can we as Jesus-followers justify ourselves or transfer the blame to those we have wronged? Isn't that hypocrisy?

## AUTHENTIC APOLOGIES

A reporter wrote a blistering attack against a well-known

politician in his newspaper column. One day after his newspaper printed his vicious accusations, the reporter and the politician whom he berated happened to run into each other in the bathroom of a restaurant where they were both dining.

As they were washing their hands next to each other, the reporter felt some pangs of remorse and said to the politician, "*I'd like to apologize for all those insulting things I wrote about you in my newspaper column yesterday.*"

The politician replied, "*Thank you. But I would have preferred it*

*had you insulted me in private and apologized for it to all your readers.*"

By way of summary, it may feel easier for us to accuse another person for their flaws than it is for us to seriously consider our own broken condition. Further, unless and until we take responsibility and admit when we were wrong, we are not really sorry.

Let us follow Christ's call to love God and neighbor through **authentic apologies** that lead to healing and reconciliation. □

*Greg Albrecht is president of Plain Truth Ministries.*



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