

# The Power of confession

When saying I'm sorry is a good idea

By John W. Kennedy

**We** live in a conflicted time when it comes to admitting we've messed up. On the one hand, confession among churchgoers is no longer in vogue. In an increasingly narcissistic and relativistic society, individual Christians frequently have trouble divulging the truth.

On the other hand, ambiguous half-hearted apologies by public figures have never been more prevalent.

True confession is indeed both biblical and healing. Speaking an admission of guilt to another individual can be more effective than telling God alone. Keeping silent can extend guilt and shame for a lifetime.

Gary R. Allen, national director

of Ministerial Enrichment for the Assemblies of God, contends that confession is misunderstood and misapplied in many Christian settings.

"Confession is only a small part of a process that includes repentance, restitution and forgiveness," Allen says. "Confession without repentance is hollow."

Too often, Allen says, confession

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in a church context happens only after an individual is captured in a sin. In many cases, people making a terse verbal admission of guilt believe it satisfies those wronged.

“Healing doesn’t come until someone willfully repents, changes their behavior, offers restitution and then asks for forgiveness,” Allen says. “Confession and forgiveness are a process, not an event.”

“Healing cannot be completed until confession is made,” says Gary R. Bruegman, a counselor in Springfield, Mo. “And there’s a major difference between the person who is caught and the desperate person who no longer can live with himself.”

“An apology can recognize that we have been harmed, helping us to understand what happened and why,” writes Nick Smith in his new book, *I Was Wrong: The Meanings of Apologies*. “The person apologizing accepts blame for injury and she explains why her actions were wrong.”

## PUBLIC APOLOGIES

Apologies abundant in American culture today hardly reflect a biblical pattern. Politicians, actors, athletes and even religious leaders who have committed a moral lapse are expected to grovel at a press conference if they want to save their careers or mitigate litigation. Rather than the scriptural private expression of regret to God and to the person offended, public apologies today are often overbroad and self-serving.

A sports celebrity, married for 24 years and the father of four sons, issued an unclear apology this year after a newspaper reported he had carried on a decade-long relationship with a country star, beginning when she was 15. He said, “I have made mistakes in my personal life for which I am sorry. ... I have sometimes made choices which have not been right.”

A collective expression of regret may cause confusion and irritation. The Church of England in September apologized to *On the Origin of the Species* author Charles Darwin — who has been dead for 126 years. Malcolm Brown, director of the

Church of England’s missions and public affairs, issued a cyberspace apology to the man who devised the theory of evolution, writing that the church “owes you an apology for misunderstanding you, by getting our first reaction wrong.”

Smith, who is a University of New Hampshire assistant philosophy professor, says the steady stream of communal apologies largely is the result of the presence of the Internet.

“Gestures of contrition are more likely to be captured in the public record,” Smith told *TPE*, “providing armchair moralists with more opportunities to scrutinize what they perceive as faulty apologies.”

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The plethora of public apologies has lowered the bar for shame, Allen believes. Hearers tend to both admire an apologizer’s humanity as well as justify their own sinful behavior, Allen contends.

Politicians have become experts at offering the *If anyone was hurt then I apologize* defense. Smith says such conditional apologies can compound the problem because the offender refuses to recognize both the misconduct and the pain it has caused.

The mea culpa today usually focuses on alleviating both responsibility and consequences for anyone involved in wrongdoing, according to

Allen. People don’t relish taking personal responsibility, so it’s popular to compare sins to a neighbor, friend or relative who has done something perceived to be worse, he says.

“Saying, ‘I’m sorry if I offended anyone by my behavior,’ lets a person off the hook,” Allen says.

“In some cases, offenders awkwardly direct their statements to a general audience without acknowledging the victims specifically,” Smith says.

A recent development is to confess wrongs online through church-based Web sites such as *mysecret.tv* or *ivescrewedup.com*. People leave anonymous cyberspace messages such as “I lied” or “I have stolen money from family and several employers.”

If contrition is expressed just in a chat room, the victim may never know it, Smith cautions.

“Apologizing begrudgingly, equivocally or evasively can embrace or compound the initial wrongdoing rather than repudiate and correct it,” Smith writes in *I Was Wrong*.

Conversely, can apologizing for the sins of others go too far?

Is it feasible for modern Germany to categorically apologize for the Holocaust, the United States for slavery or the Catholic Church for pogroms and other crimes during the Crusades?

“Collective apologies for harms in the distant past present all sorts of confusions,” Smith says. “How meaningful can an apology be if it never reaches its victim?”

## RUDIMENTS OF MAKING AMENDS

Confession to God is a necessary step in righting wrongs, and that frequently happens in an altar call. First John 1:9 states, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (NIV).

“We can feel it in our heart that something is wrong, but there is power in confessing words by mouth,” Bruegman says. “It’s an important and necessary step in the process of healing, but one of the most difficult.”



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"Intellectually we know that God hears us, but there is no one to hold us immediately accountable," Allen says.

The level of confession must be on par with the severity of the fault, Allen says.

"The greater the offense, the greater the intensity of the confession," Allen says. "Sin is sin, but some are more horrific than others. Gossip isn't on the same scale as murder. Yet if you talk disparagingly about someone in church, you must confess and repent to all you lied to directly."

## BENEFITS OF COMING CLEAN

There is value in confessing sin to another individual for physical and emotional well-being. James 5:16 declares, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."

"How many of our diseases would go away if we lived a confessed life?" asks author and speaker Jane Rubietta, whose latest book is *Come Closer*.

Rubietta says a voice-to-voice expression of regret is best because it gives the other person the opportunity to respond. An e-mail or letter denies allowing the other party the freedom of offering forgiveness.

Acknowledging guilt unburdens sin that ruptures relationships, according to Rubietta.

"As Christians, we spend a lot of time trying to look good, moral and joyful," Rubietta says. "The humbling that comes from confessing your sin to someone else is powerful."

Allen says confessing can have cathartic and therapeutic benefits if there is an authentic change in heart and mind.

"There's something incredibly freeing to an individual when a con-

fession is made," Bruegman says.

## POTENTIAL DRAWBACKS

Nevertheless, there is risk in baring one's soul. Admitting wrong can be painful. People may be judged upon revealing something that has been concealed for a long time.

"Especially in infidelity, a lot of questions — like *Why did you do this?* — may not be able to be answered," Bruegman says. "That may leave the offended person wondering, *What else are you hiding from me?*"

But if sin goes unconfessed, it can perpetuate a pattern of deception in other areas of life, Allen says. Fear and insecurity can lead an individual to develop a character flaw that suppresses the truth, according to Allen.

"Guilt and shame can accelerate the sin because it remains unre-

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## BACK FROM THE BRINK

At a Promise Keepers rally at Seattle's King Dome in July 1995, Pastor Charlie Salmon prayed in anguish over his 1990 adulterous relationship with a woman in his church. It was no longer a secret, and some had threatened to tell the congregation unless he confessed.

Charlie and Sandy Salmon had come to Turner AG in Turner, Ore., in 1989. Their previous years of whirlwind ministry already threatened their marriage. As Turner AG grew and Charlie's portfolio expanded, he became even more distant from his wife. Eventually he turned his attention to another woman. Nine months later that relationship ended. The woman left her husband and the church.

"The shock of what I had done made me realize just how far I had fallen from any semblance of Christ's standard," Charlie says.

He worked hard to repair his relationship with Sandy, but did so while keeping his infidelity

secret. Then the woman confided in friends in 1995.

It was Sandy's birthday the day Charlie picked her up from her parents' home in Seattle after the Promise Keepers rally. She had hoped they could enjoy a family dinner, but Charlie said he needed to talk with the district superintendent. Sandy dropped Charlie off at the district office and went home to pray.

"I began to pray in the dining room about Charlie and whatever situation he must be going through at the district office," she remembers, "and God communicated to me the reason for Charlie's dilemma just as clearly as if I had heard an audible voice."

At first the anguish over their marriage surfaced, and Sandy wanted to walk away from the marriage.

"It felt like a huge door was open for me," she says, "but if I've ever heard the voice of God, I heard it that moment. The Holy

Spirit showed me my marriage as if it were a wall. The open door was my hope for escape. But high up in the wall I could see a small window."

God began to show her the window was the opening to His path.

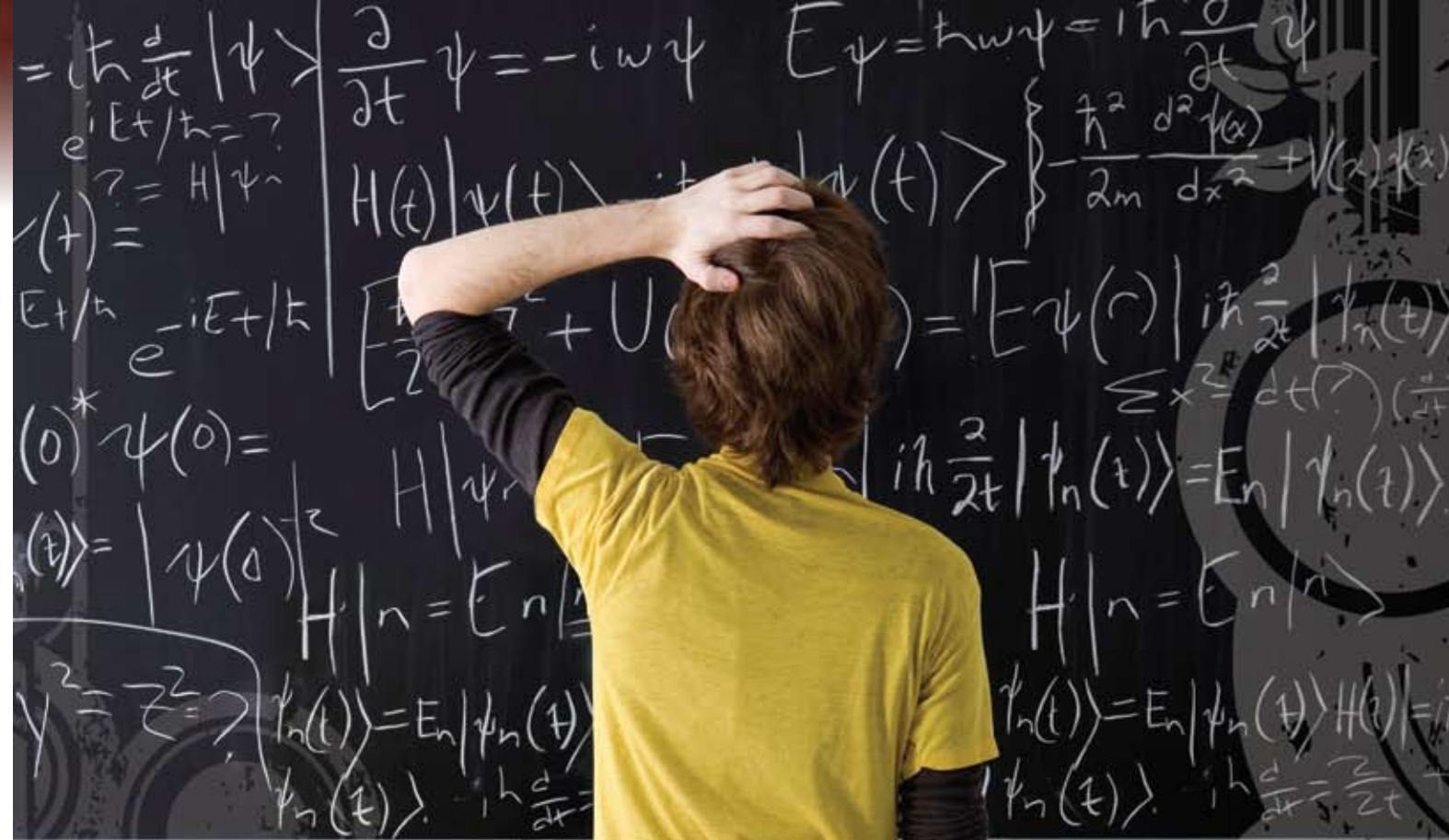
Charlie and Superintendent Bill Gallaher arrived to find Sandy kneeling in the dining room already in tears. God had been preparing her for what Charlie was going to say. As the story emerged, Gallaher asked her, "Can you forgive?"

With that question, she realized the window she had seen was the window of forgiveness.

"I looked up immediately," she says, "and told Charlie, 'Yes, I can forgive.'"

Charlie and Sandy now serve at Church on the Ridge (AG) in Snoqualmie, Wash., where they share from their past and point people to God's grace. **tpe**

— Scott Harrup



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## LET GO OF BITTERNESS

Unsurprisingly, Jan Coates resented her physically abusive mother long into adulthood. Her mother, Bertha, a diagnosed manic-depressive paranoid schizophrenic, was a drug addict and alcoholic. During her childhood, Jan remembers being beaten with metal hangers, locked in closets and having boiling water poured on her body. When an uncle raped her at age 9, Jan says her mother ignored it.

Ironically, in early adulthood Coates became her mother's caregiver, watching out for her after she was repeatedly evicted from apartments. Finally, out of desperation, Coates arranged for her mother to become a ward of the state.

But one snowy day, Coates saw her mother walking the streets of Kansas City, Mo., with holes in her shoes and a plastic trash bag in her hand. She went to buy her mother boots, gloves and groceries.

When Coates arrived at her mother's apartment she found her to be calm and rational. Instead of booze in the refrigerator she had food. Bertha invited Jan to meet her new friends — at the nearby Salvation Army complex. Bertha, who had become a bell ringer, put her arm around her daughter and told her she loved her.

Later, Coates admitted to the Salvation Army worker who faithfully drove Bertha to Bible study every week that she sometimes hated her mother. Then, for the first time, she told God the resentment she had bottled up inside for years.

"If I had never confessed my real feelings about my mother, I never would have had real freedom from my past," Coates told *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*. "It only came about by recognizing and admitting the pain that my mother caused."

"Sister Bertha" died at the age of 72, seven years after the reconciliation with her daughter. She was buried in a Salvation Army uniform. **tpe**

— John W. Kennedy

solved," says Bruegman, who spent 19 years as dean of students at Central Bible College. "Or it may be manifest in other behaviors."

Bruegman says humans have a tendency to avoid a full confessional as well as to assign blame to others. For instance, someone who is a drug addict may claim he can't help it because of his upbringing or he became hooked in an emotionally trying time. Such remarks are an effort to minimize the sin and its impact on others, Bruegman says.

"It always makes it worse when we try to justify the extent to which we've been involved," Bruegman says.

"Once trust has been broken, even in church, it's difficult to re-establish trust," Allen says. "People can't act as if nothing happened."

While confessing may clear a guilty party's conscience, it may not lead to restoration. God can truly

forget sin, but some people refuse to do so. There may be a backlash among Christians who look differently at a person when a dark secret is revealed.

### HALLMARKS OF CONFESSION

Experts believe various guidelines should be followed for an apology to be effective. The confession should:

- **Be heartfelt.** It should show emotion that conveys true sorrow over the behavior or words that caused the problem.

- **Be genuine.** A half-hearted utterance designed merely to quickly end the matter won't do.

- **Be made in person.** If at all possible, the apologizer should be able to look into the eyes of the offended party, rather than making a phone call, sending a letter or typing an e-mail. While face-to-face apologies are best, a

written admission of guilt is constructive if it's precise, carefully worded and provides a physical record.

- **Be specific.** Vague contrition provides no satisfaction for the wronged person. The confession should address the details known to the offended party.

- **Be complete.** A confessor shouldn't blame other people, heredity or life's circumstances for the improper conduct.

- **Be responsive.** A hurt shouldn't linger for days — or years — before being acknowledged.

- **Be repentant.** Vow to never repeat the mistake and mean it. **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel* and blogs at Midlife Musings (jkennedy.agblogger.org).

E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).

## AN APOLOGY NOT ACKNOWLEDGED

Nineteen-year-old Troy Oates believed in God and attended an Assemblies of God church in Elgin, Ill. Still, he wasn't serving God. And he figured a few alcoholic drinks wouldn't faze him.

But a couple of drinks turned into a lot of drinks. Soon after getting behind the wheel of his car, Oates crashed into a tree. The wreck left him hospitalized for 12 days and killed his best friend, Kurt, a front-seat passenger.

Oates lost his driver's license for two years. In lieu of prison, a judge sentenced him to 500 hours of community service in hospital emergency rooms, where Oates gained a new appreciation for and outlook on life. There he saw much self-inflicted pain, from suicide attempts to accidental drug overdoses.

The judge also sentenced Oates to talk about the impact of his drunk driving to driver education classes at all 15 high schools in Kane County, Ill.

Now, 16 years later, Oates is a union electrician. Although he endured a life-altering experience, he knows God has forgiven him. Oates says his friends, family and congregation helped him to recover emotionally. He wrote a letter expressing his sorrow to the parents of his friend, but never received a reply.

"Even though I apologized, I know there is nothing I could say or do to bring their son back," Oates laments. **tpe**

— John W. Kennedy

## ABCs OF SALVATION

To know God and be ready for heaven, follow these steps:

### A. Admit you are a sinner.

"There is no one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:10,23 (See Romans 5:8; 6:23.)

### Ask God's forgiveness and repent of your sins.

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:13 (See Acts 3:19.)

### B. Believe in Jesus (put your trust in Him) as your only hope of salvation.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 (See John 14:6.)

### Become a child of God by receiving Christ.

"To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." John 1:12 (See Revelation 3:20.)

### C. Confess that Jesus is your Lord.

"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9 (See verse 10.)

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