

A model apology from a sinner-saint

An ELCA bishop apologized for sexist comments he made—without claiming that they were out of character.

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In February, Bill Gohl [posted an apology to the website of the Delaware-Maryland Synod](#) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which he serves as bishop. He was not addressing a crime, impropriety, or heresy. Gohl's apology was for public comments he made about three female pastors in the synod—comments that diminished the women's callings. Charged with honoring Connie Miller's 35 years of ministry, Gohl instead praised her gifts as a parent. Then, when introducing a congregation's former pastors, Gohl highlighted both Paige Evers's short stature and Christine Myers Parker's youthful appearance.

Few jaws will hit the floor upon learning of these remarks. They are familiar in character to many others heard elsewhere. They are also sexist and wrong—and

when two individuals approached Gohl to tell him so, he listened.

His public response is a model apology. Gohl is specific, describing his words and the way “they missed the mark of the moment.” He’s unequivocal about his responsibility, neither asking to be judged by his good intentions nor shifting the focus to those who took offense. And he doesn’t mention the fact that other people make more egregiously sexist comments all the time. “I make no explanations,” he writes. “The ways that I spoke of these colleagues was wrong.”

Perhaps most important, Gohl doesn’t frame his offenses as aberrations, mere blips of wrong from a guy who generally gets it right. Instead he acknowledges the wrongness as an integral part of his story. Misogyny is “a disease that I recognize in myself,” writes Gohl. “I live in the duality,” he goes on, between this reality and another one: his desire to do better. The latter Gohl shows by beginning his apology with the sort of words he failed to offer before: praise for his colleagues’ gifts and accomplishments as pastors.

Gohl demonstrates not only what an apology can be, but why apologies are needed: because of sin. Sexism—like any other ideology that devalues human beings—is sin. And sin is systemic, universal. It is less like an unpleasant personality trait and more like air pollution. Everyone is susceptible to its power. Gohl is committed to resisting sexism, yet sometimes he does the very thing he hates (Rom. 7:15). Like all of us, he is a sinner as well as a saint.

In a culture where sexism is pervasive but also culturally proscribed, it’s not an easy thing to confess. More often we prefer to debate the boundaries of such a sin: What’s an offense worth taking seriously? What does it take to get on the list of offenders? But if there’s a list of people susceptible to this sin or any other, the truth is we’re all on it. The difference for Christians is that we believe people are not ultimately defined by sin and are therefore free to confess—we can screw up without being screwups. And when we do screw up, instead of trying to explain it away, we can simply tell it straight: I was wrong, and I’m sorry.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “How to apologize.”