“Mistakes Were Made”

If you’re the nation’s top cop, you know it’s a bad day when pundits compare you to Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake.

Under fire from solons of both parties for the controversial dismissal of eight US attorneys, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales met the press. Were the dismissals politically motivated? Who suggested them and why? Inquiring minds wanted to know.

Gonzales assured his critics he would get to the bottom of this. Mistakes were made, he explained.

Admitting mistakes can be constructive. The problem, of course, was Gonzales’ ambiguous undertone. Was it honest confession or artful sidestep?

Confession or Sidestep?

Maybe mistakes were made means, Somebody messed up royally. We’re investigating thoroughly, so please sit tight. We’ll name names soon.

Or it could mean, I know who botched this. But I don’t want to point the finger directly at me or my colleagues, so I’ll throw up a vague camouflage.

Maybe Gonzales meant the former. Critics cried foul. *The New York Times* called it an “astonishingly maladroit…Nixonian…dodge.”{1} Administration inconsistencies about who-did-or-knew-what-when did not help quiet skeptics. Who would take responsibility? Ghosts of Janet, Justin and the 2004 Super Bowl reappeared.

Timberlake’s press agent announced back then, “I am sorry if anyone was offended by the wardrobe malfunction during the halftime performance.”{2} Jackson told a press conference, “If I offended anybody, that was truly not my intention.”{3}

William Safire has identified a special verb tense for similar nonconfession confessions: “the past exonerative.”{4}

True Confessions

What did Gonzales mean? I don’t know; I’m still watching. But the “mistakes were made” flap illustrates the need for guidelines for fessing up when warranted.

How about, I was wrong; I’m sorry; please forgive me?

That’s seldom easy. Its risky. Makes you vulnerable to your enemies.

Duke political science professor Michael Munger observes that many politicians seem reluctant to admit faults: “I wonder if some capacity for self-delusion is a requirement for being a politician.”{5} Munger also notes that business star Henry Ford was reputed to have exemplified the doctrine, “Never apologize, never explain.”{6} Literary giant Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed, “No sensible person ever made an apology.”{7}

Reminds me of the editor who, when asked by an exasperated reporter if he’d ever been wrong, replied, Yes. Once I thought I was wrong, but I wasn’t.”

Could big egos that drive success be rendering some folks relationally and ethically flawed?

Plastic Buckets

My second year in university, I swiped a plastic bucket from behind the lectern in the psychology lecture hall. It had been there every day during the semester. No one wants it, I convinced myself. It deserves to be taken. I used it to wash my car.

Two years later, I considered a biblical perspective: If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to … [God], he

is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.{8}

That bucket kept coming to mind. I needed to admit my theft to God and make restitution.

My booty long since lost, I purchased a new bucket and carried it sheepishly across campus one afternoon. Finding no one in the psychology building to confess to, I left the bucket in a broom closet with a note of explanation. Maybe a janitor read it. My conscience was clear.

We all probably have some plastic buckets in our lives, observed an associate. If you do, may I recommend honesty for easier sleeping? Oh, and if you happened to be the owner of that bucket I stole, I was wrong. I'm sorry. Please forgive me.

Notes

1. "Politics, Pure and Cynical," (Editorial), *The New York Times*, March 14, 2007; http://tinyurl.com/yvnjyd, accessed March 18, 2007.
2. John M. Broder, "Familiar Fallback for Officials: 'Mistakes Were Made'," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2007; http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/14/washington/14mistakes.html, accessed March 18, 2007.
3. Robert J. Bliwise, "We Apologize: The Sorry State of Remorse," *Duke Magazine* 90:3 May-June 2004; http://www.dukemagazine.duke.edu/dukemag/issues/050604/apologize1.html, accessed March 18, 2007.
4. Diane Hartman, "Watching My Language" (Book Review of William Safire's *Watching My Language*), *Denver Post* Online, "September 14" (no year given); http://extras.denverpost.com/books/book23.htm, accessed March 18, 2007.
5. Bliwise, loc. cit.
6. Ibid.

7. Ibid. It is unclear from the text whether Munger or Bliwise supplied the Emerson quotation.
8. 1 John 1:8-9 NLT.

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