

Roy Bishop (ed. Richard Collins)

Adultery

(Part two)

You hear about a church member who's committing adultery. Perhaps it's happening inside your community, with another church member. It's easy to jump into action, to confront and admonish. But before you do that, may I suggest that you should stop and ask yourself some questions?

1. Where did the information come from?
2. Are you sure about the facts?
3. Do you know what the injured party may know or feel about the situation?
4. What are your motives for confronting the guilty party?
5. Are you more concerned about the 'purity and reputation' of the church or the welfare of the injured party?

These are just a few of the questions worth considering. There are more.

Perhaps the most important question is this one: If I intervene, will I make things more difficult for the injured party? In all of this, it's worth turning to the life of Jesus, who met a woman caught in adultery, as described in John 8. Notice, it's only the woman who is condemned by the religious elite, not the man. Their motives for accusing her are clearly distorted. I wonder how she thought of herself as she was led through the streets, the onlookers jeering and mocking. She must have been brought very low,

expecting only judgement and punishment. Yet Jesus' brilliant response acknowledged that sin had taken place – 'go and sin no more' – while also lifting her up and validating her as a valuable human being. We can only imagine the transformation that took place in her heart.

So what should we do when hearing about adultery taking place in our community? Jesus said, 'men love darkness rather than light, and refuse to come to the light.' So we must surely expect resistance and defensiveness. In each case, finding a way in will vary, since we are all different. Here are some possible ways forward when dealing with each party.

- **The innocent party wants to end the marriage as soon as possible.** They are deeply hurt and they want to get out immediately. The challenge here is that the response is borne of profound emotions of hurt and in almost every case, it would be better if they took some time to consider the options. Making quick decisions about huge life circumstances is rarely wise. This is especially the case when children are involved.
- **The guilty party admits adultery and intends to continue.** Lack of repentance makes things much more challenging. Without a mutual intention to heal the wounds and build a new life based on forgiveness and repentance, the injured party is left in a position of extreme difficulty and

pain. It is appropriate in such cases to discuss with the guilty party the consequences of their actions. It may well be necessary to exercise church discipline.

- **The guilty party confesses their adultery and seeks forgiveness.** In such cases, it's necessary to question what's going on deep inside the human heart. Does the guilty party truly understand the impact of his/her actions?

In deciding a way forward, has the guilty party considered how best to confess, so that full responsibility is taken and true repentance is coming from a broken heart. If it's from a desire to return quickly to 'how things were before,' then problems can arise. It's important to spend time processing the gravity of the sin, not only by repenting, but also by carefully considering how the relationship can be restored.

When counselling a couple going through reconciliation, it's important not to lecture. It's all well and good knowing that the guilty party needs to repent and the injured party should forgive, but theory and practice are very different things. Sin has consequences and only through God's grace can each party find a new life together. And it is a new life, one in which they will be re-building on a foundation of trust and forgiveness. It takes time.

After adultery, all of the parties will experience a sense of loss. This is obvious for the innocent party, but it can also apply to the others in the triangle. The

guilty party, in particular, will need to reach a point where they have a clear vision of what a re-built marriage looks like. A fresh understanding of commitment and covenant must emerge if reconciliation is to last for the future.

Sadly, there are times when an injured party is unwilling to rebuild the marriage. The hurt has gone so deep that they see no future in it. There may be earlier scars of betrayal by a parent or care-giver, the roots of which accentuate the pain, building a wall of protection inside the heart. Whatever the grounds, love and care are essential if the person is to find restoration and a path towards peace with God. Without peace with God, they will struggle to find peace within and with others.

One essential ingredient is time. Time to accept, time to adjust, time to rethink, time to reflect and time to refocus. No benefit arises from pressuring someone into forgiveness. The Holy Spirit has a way of dealing with us in his time, at his pace, and always with our best interests at heart. God wants to restore damaged and wounded people, even those of us who have made bad choices in our lives.

Remember, also, that God's heart of compassion is one soaked in grace. He extends grace to all, even the most broken and shockingly, even to the most sinful. So there is always hope, even when hope seems far away.



Roy Bishop

At the time of original writing, Roy Bishop was accredited by the Association of Christian Counsellors as an Emeritus Counselling Practitioner/Supervisor, and facilitated ACC Pastoral Skills Course in UK and Sierra Leone. He was also a trainer with Crisis Care Training International (www.crisiscaretraining.org), and an elder with Kennet Valley Free Church in Reading (www.kvfc.org.uk).¹ Following a heart attack in 2016, he retired from formal activities.

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