

Roy Bishop (ed. Richard Collins)

# Adultery

(Part three)

## How can we support a couple willing to rebuild their relationship after adultery?

A man was once guilty of committing adultery. Trapped in the behaviour, he sought a way out. He went to see his pastor, who listened without judging him. Instead, he talked about the grace and mercy of God. In time, the man came to a place of repentance. He stopped the affair, turning away from his sin; he determined to live a new life. His peace with God was restored; he also felt more at peace with himself than he had for a long time.

He then asked the pastor if he thought he should tell his wife, who had remained in the dark about his affair. The pastor asked about his motives, inviting the man to think about the potential damage that might result by telling his wife. He felt relief that the pastor hadn't told him to tell his wife immediately. It felt as though a huge burden had been lifted from his shoulders, so he went home rejoicing in the mercy of God.

Not much later, his wife commented on the changes she saw in her husband. He seemed more content, more at peace. It was noticeable. As they talked, he felt the time was right to confess. He admitted to the

sin, and asked for forgiveness. It was not easy for her to do, but she listened carefully and she did forgive him. Later on, he told his pastor that he believed the timing was a critical element in the story. Indeed, he felt that if he'd confessed too soon, his wife might not have been able to forgive him. It was only in the timing of Almighty God that restoration and forgiveness had taken place. Together with his pastor, he gave thanks for God's mercy.

This story comes from David W. Augsburger's book, *The Freedom of Forgiveness*.

It teaches a lot about God's compassion, his wisdom and his mercy. It also highlights some key points for a leader faced with a church member in this situation. How should a pastor counsel a person

who wishes to rebuild a relationship after committing adultery?

- Repentance and forgiveness are God's principles for restoring a broken marriage. However, they cannot be rushed or cajoled. They must emerge from hearts which fully embrace the truth of what has happened. Initially, the steps may be quite tentative. Therefore, counsellors should not push or demand that their clients act before

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they are ready.

- In human relationships, forgiveness is a process. Emotions may remain. Eg. anger, hurt, feelings of rejection. They are NOT the same as unforgiveness. Restoration takes time. It requires patience on both sides.
- In Psalm 51, David confessed that his sins were against God, not only against the people involved. God is gracious to us.
- Professional counselling can be helpful, but should not be insisted on for couples going through the process of restoration. Each couple must decide in their own time if they wish to pursue such a course.

### What about the third party?

The person outside the marriage, the third party, may fall into a number of different categories. They may know the damage they've caused or they may not. They may be open to support and counselling or they may not. A whole raft of different circumstances may apply. Have they themselves been misled? How much do they know?

It's important that a pastor is available to offer support – or refer that person to an appropriate person. The 'third party' will almost certainly experience a sense of loss, quite apart from guilt and possibly anger and rejection. Only the Holy Spirit can bring complete healing. Church leaders can offer prayer and support, but only to those who wish to engage and are eager to seek healing.

### How might we support the children?

Every instance of adultery comes with its own particular personalities and circumstances. Therefore, each one is different. The effect on children will depend on their ages and their personalities. It's impossible to generalise about such effects. However, here are some guidelines, which might be helpful.

- Be aware that children are sometimes used as bargaining chips. It's not right, but it happens.
- The children may be compliant, simply to avoid further stress or tension.
- Children will often be confused about their

loyalties. That's natural. Never play off one parent against the other, however much you may be aware of their respective guilt.

- Children, especially those who start acting out their anger and frustration, need to be shown love, care and acceptance.
- It's important to maintain a regular life, as far as possible. Structure and appropriate boundaries are essential when children are involved.
- Avoid showing favouritism towards one of the parents.
- Listen to the children if they want to talk, but do not pry.
- Be alert to red flags that indicate that a child might be in danger. However, take professional advice before acting, since a hasty response with imperfect knowledge can do more harm than good.

The church may be able to offer practical support, but it should not conflict with the wishes of the wider family. Especially when extended family become involved, church members need to be available and supportive, but not intrusive. Sensitivity is high and misunderstanding about 'those meddling Christians' can make things worse. Clear communication is critical to avoid misunderstandings.

### Prevention is better than cure

A marriage is a very personal and intimate relationship. Each marriage has its own 'rules' about what is acceptable, from breaking wind to who does what around the house!

Repairing something that's broken is far harder than working to prevent the breakage in the first place. That's why marriage courses and support

are so important. Very often, troubled couples seek help when it's too late. Or at least, the problems have become deeply embedded in the marriage. A healthy church should guide couples towards courses and resources which provide guidance. Putting out fires is dangerous. It's much better

to teach people how to wear fire-retardant clothing, if you'll pardon the analogy!

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Finally, let's talk about sex. An unsatisfying sex life may be a contributing factor when adultery is concerned. It may not be the whole story, but lack of sexual intimacy is certainly capable of causing a rift in a marriage. Some years ago, I was attending a training course designed to teach parents how to teach sex education to their children. At one point, we were asked to position ourselves along an imaginary continuum in answer to the question, 'Do you feel the church regards Christian marriage as important?' Everyone agreed; we all stood at the 'Yes' end.

Next question: "How many of you think sex is very important in marriage?" Hardly anyone moved; again, we were all at the 'Yes' end.

Next question: 'How many of you have heard a sermon about these topics in the last year to eighteen months in your churches?' Almost everyone moved to the other end of the line. An emphatic 'No.'

Sadly, I have counselled a number of Christian men over the years who were concerned about the state of their marriages. They genuinely wanted to live lives honouring to God and to their marriage vows, but they were struggling. Let me be clear. These were men who had obeyed the church's teaching on sexual ethics. They had waited until marriage before having sex for the first time with their wives. What they hadn't been taught was how to deal with sexual difficulties. As in most areas of life, unrealistic expectations can lead to anger and frustration. They

understood almost nothing about the need to be patient in developing a satisfying, intimate sexual relationship. They thought they'd won the lottery and sex – a uniquely wonderful gift – would give them untold pleasure. Their disappointment when it hadn't turn out that way had led to real struggles.

This is why regular marriage courses are so important. They are capable of staving off future difficulties and they can help a couple find a path towards healing and satisfaction in their physical relationship. No, they're not magic bullets, but they do help.

One final word on counselling. At times, it is misunderstood. There are some who think they will be given a lecture on what to do – the very opposite of how counselling works. Yet, counselling is a resource which can help couples find forgiveness and restoration after adultery. With a good counsellor, marriages can find a new path towards healing and a future. It may not be appropriate or even necessary for everyone, because each situation is different, but it is something which leaders should consider offering.

### For further reading:

Michele Weiner Davis, *The Divorce Remedy* – a superb resource for anyone wanting help in rebuilding a marriage

*Nicky and Sila Lee*, *The Marriage Book*



### 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](http://www.crisiscaretraining.org)), and an elder with Kennet Valley Free Church in Reading ([www.kvfc.org.uk](http://www.kvfc.org.uk)). Following a heart attack in 2016, he retired from formal activities.

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