



Adulterous Church Members: Should They Stay or Leave?

The title to this article may seem strange, since a basic characteristic of any Christ-honoring, Bible believing church is to bring people *into* the church. On the other hand, a situation could occur in a church in which a person might be encouraged to leave. One such situation is described below.

ADULTERY PARTNERS IN THE SAME CHURCH

When adultery is discovered between two people in the same church, one of the greatest challenges in a church's life and ministry begins.

See [God's Purposes in His Children's Trials](#)

Parenthetically, if you are not aware that church (ekklesia) can mean a small group of believers as well as a much larger group of believers, please take time to read [Church – Do You Know What It Means?](#)

There are numerous challenges for a church with adultery partners in their midst.

- Communication guidelines must be established for believers who are aware of the adultery.

See [Communicating the Sins of Others – Why, When, How](#)

- Facts about adultery in a church family should be made available to those who will be responsible for guiding others through adultery's aftermath. Of special concern will be how the adultery partners selfishly used fellow believers, church gatherings, and facilities to begin and continue on-going adulterous behavior. *This information is helpful for developing a recovery plan for individuals, families, and, possibly, the entire church in the short-term. These facts are also beneficial for making long-term changes that guard against any future sins of this kind.*

See [Telling the Truth is Naturally Impossible](#)

- Family members and friends of the adulterous partners need comfort, prayer, and encouragement.

See [Don't Lose Heart; Trusting in God in Trials Out of Our Control; Sorrows that Last a Lifetime](#)

- Church leaders and those helping with the adultery situation need to pray, often as a group, in addition to praying with those directly involved or impacted by the adultery.

See [Do You REALLY Believe What You Say about Prayer?; God Always Answers Prayer but Not as We Think; Three Prayer Mistakes of Well-Meaning Believers; Prayer: A Viable Option or an Absolute Necessity](#)

- Teaching on forgiveness, mercy, and grace is necessary.

Refer to [Forgiveness: The Possible Impossibility; Merciful Justice – Thankful Response to Christ's Love; and GRACE](#)

- Believers equipped to counsel biblically should, in coordination with church leaders, meet regularly with any couple with an adulterous spouse. It would be helpful if at least two counseling couples are available for on-going discipleship purposes. In addition, any man in the church living for Christ, consistently obeying God's Word, and aware of the adulterous situation could meet with a male adulterer or the husband of an adulteress. In other words, a male who is alone counsels only with males. The same guidelines are applicable for any Christ-honoring female meeting privately with an adulteress or the wife of an adulterous husband. A female, when alone, meets only with females.

See [Anchors of Hope for Any Trial; Loving an "Unlovable" Mate; Confession – The Ultimate Test of Truthfulness; Responding to Guilt ... and Changing Accordingly; True Love is Not Based on Feelings; You Can Change ... One Step at a Time](#)

- If a pastor (elder, overseer), deacon, or deaconess is adulterous, then that person should resign immediately from ministry leadership because of a lack of scriptural qualifications (1 Timothy 3:1-12, Titus 1:5-9).

- Basic fellowship and communication guidelines should be established for those who have committed adultery. This plan should also be communicated to everyone aware of the adultery.

There are numerous questions, planned responses, and unplanned consequences precipitated by adultery between professing believers in the same church. One of the more difficult responses is the *practical application* of God’s truth presented in the following passages.

Psalm 34:14, Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

1 Corinthians 6:18, Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.

1 Thessalonians 5:22, Abstain from every form of evil.

2 Timothy 2:22, So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

The above verses indicate that a person should abstain, turn away, and even flee from sexual immorality. For an adulterous person, this obviously means to decisively depart from the partner in adultery. Practically speaking, this means no visual contact, no written or verbal communication, no fellowship, and no relationship, casual or otherwise.

Matthew 18:7-9, Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! ⁸ And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

The above passage emphasizes the necessity of forthright, even dramatic, responses to avoid temptation and subsequent sin. Obviously, losing body parts is not in view, but a believer should make and follow a biblical plan that helps avoid any person who is a temptation to sin. Quite often, this involves changing one’s current schedule and destinations. The biblical admonition to “flee from sexual immorality” becomes significantly problematic if two adulterous partners maintain a schedule in which they can regularly see and potentially communicate (verbally or otherwise) with each other at church functions. In addition, the difficulties that a non-adulterous wife or husband would face by seeing or being around the adultery partner of one’s spouse are profound.

Initially, a couple dealing with adulterous behavior in their marriage may decide not to attend the same church gatherings anymore. An unmarried person who has committed adultery with a fellow believer in the same church may choose a similar path. Even though this decision may initially be made out of guilt, fear, discouragement, anger, embarrassment, hopelessness, or simply not knowing what to do, it is a wise step in that it helps avoid on-going contact with the other adulterous partner in the same church. The danger of an adulterous believer withdrawing from a church, however, is that there could be a temptation to reject ministry from fellow believers and to isolate one’s self from Christian fellowship. That possibility is minimized and usually eliminated when concerned believers respond to help restore a fellow believer overtaken in sin.

Galatians 6:1-2, Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

If both partners in adultery decide to remain in the same church fellowship, however, church leaders should prayerfully consider asking one or both of them to leave the church for a period of time. *The time duration for such an arrangement is discussed later in this article.*

Of course, there are variables that would help determine if one or both adultery partners should no longer attend church gatherings. To begin with, it may be easier for an unmarried person to cease attending church meetings than for a married person. There are many other issues to evaluate, however, such as the children of an adulterous parent. The care and/or involvement of the children in the church must be considered. Distance from church facilities could be a factor. Special ministries meeting unique circumstances (such as a class for disabled children) would be evaluated. Also, multiple services provide a possible alternative for partners in adultery to not be in a church meeting location at the same time.

Church leaders must prayerfully consider many factors before they can determine how to help adultery partners in the same church obey the biblical admonition to “depart from evil.” For the sake of the adulterous partners, their families, and the church, however, a definite decision must be made.

GUIDELINES FOR THE INTERIM

As long as the adulterous partners attend church meetings (especially worship services) at the same time, church leaders should alert them to guidelines that will be instituted to help eliminate on-going adulterous behavior. These guidelines would also benefit the non-adulterous spouses, other family members, and concerned fellow believers. Guidelines of this nature are unique to each church. On the other hand, there are basic guidelines that are applicable anywhere.

For example, there should be different arrival and departure times for the two adultery partners. If they have vehicles, they should park a considerable distance from each other. In church gatherings, the adulterous individuals must place themselves where eye contact with a former adulterous partner is not possible. Partners in adultery should not be in the same conversations with other people (even mutual friends) before or after church meetings. Partners in adultery should not be physically near each other for any reason. If they each have young children, they would not escort their children to or from the nursery or children's areas at the same time. If there are multiple worship services or Bible studies, then the adultery partners are to attend different sessions. An adulterous person and his/her spouse should realize that if any guideline is violated, a church leader or fellow believer will lovingly but firmly intervene on the spot.

Of course, adultery partners are never to attend the same small group meetings. Eye contact, casual or inadvertent touching, physical cues, or verbal communication in a small group can potentially encourage on-going adulterous behavior. In addition, the pressure placed on the betrayed spouse is intense in such a setting.

Thus far in this article, actions and decisions of a church family are in response to adulterous believers. You may wonder, "What about the betrayed spouse?" This is a vitally important consideration and should not be overlooked. All responses related to adultery between church family members must take into account the impact on the betrayed spouse. This person is usually reeling from the discovery of adultery and its inevitable aftermath. When church leaders or other fellow believers consider any decision or action with regard to an adulterous believer, they should always ask, "How will this impact the betrayed spouse?" Quite often, it is the betrayed spouse's input that determines the wisest and most appropriate course of action.

With what has been presented thus far, one fact should be evident . . . *It is very difficult to make substantial progress in restoring marriages crippled by adultery when participants in adultery continue with the same schedules and routines that provided the opportunity for past adulterous behavior.*

As the following indicates, an adulterous married person who desires to be restored to the Lord and one's spouse will find more personalized help in a small group of believers who know of the adulterous situation and are committed to the restoration process. Similarly, a partner in adultery who is unmarried will also find more personalized help in a similar small group situation.

WHAT ABOUT THE CHURCH'S INTERACTION WITH ADULTEROUS PEOPLE WHO "LEAVE"?

Persons overtaken in sin who subsequently withdraw from church gatherings (whether small or large) should not be left on their own. Christ-honoring believers have a responsibility to restore those who are overtaken in sin (Galatians 6:1-2).

Galatians 6:1-2, Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Caring followers of Christ can lead struggling fellow believers to powerful and unfailing encouragement found in God's Word (Psalm 34:18; 119:50; 145:14; Romans 15:1-4).

Psalm 34:18, The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.

Psalm 119:50, This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life.

Psalm 145:14, The LORD upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.

Romans 15:1-4, We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ² Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. ³ For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." ⁴ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Although adulterous partners may mistakenly choose to maintain some level of "controlled" or "minimized" contact with each other, believers should realize that partners in adultery should not have contact with one another in any

dimension for many months and, in many instances, never again.

Life for a repentant adulterer must dramatically change for God's glory and for others' benefit. The initial goals of adulterous people who repent are aimed at restoring one's personal walk with the Lord and, if married, renewing a covenantal relationship with one's spouse. These goals are achievable by God's grace, but contact in any dimension between adultery partners is detrimental to spiritual and relational progress.

CONFESSING SINS AND GRANTING BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS

Ideally, former partners in adultery should not even be in the same general area (such as a shopping mall, supermarket, sports stadium, or large meeting room) until they have met privately to confess specific sins and to ask for forgiveness. Of course, spouses and, possibly, other witnesses would be present at this meeting as well.

A meeting designed to confess and forgive, however, has specific prerequisites, one of which focuses on the repentance of those committing adultery. With repentance in view, a meeting focused on confessing sin and asking for forgiveness should be delayed until the participants understand biblical truth about confession and forgiveness. It should also be obvious that the betrayed spouse needs time to understand and be ready to grant biblical forgiveness to his/her spouse's partner in adultery as well.

See [*Confession – The Ultimate Test of Truthfulness; Forgiveness: The Possible Impossibility*](#)

FOCUSED ON PERSONAL GROWTH

Even though a believer growing in Christ may want to be updated about the spiritual welfare of a former partner in adultery, such a request and every other aspect related to adultery's aftermath must be evaluated scripturally. In light of the need for continual spiritual growth, every action or thought can be evaluated with two simple questions—“Does this help me grow in Christ?” and “Could this divert my spiritual progress by tempting me to think about sins of the past?” The Apostle Paul's counsel is certainly applicable in this matter . . .

Philippians 3:13b-14, . . .But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

There are only so many hours in the day, and attentive effort with regard to repentance should be focused on one's relationship with Christ (Bible study, scripture memory, prayer, obedience to Scripture), one's personal life (daily responsibilities), one's spouse (caring, providing, loving, communicating), and one's family (meeting needs, encouraging and helping). Eventually, ministry to those outside one's immediate family will also be undertaken.

WHAT ABOUT ON-GOING CHURCH INVOLVEMENT?

A believer seeking a restored walk with the Lord and a renewed covenantal relationship with one's spouse needs supportive, Christ-honoring relationships in a church. This type of church fellowship must be rooted in a basic understanding of the true essence of the church, which is not dependent on a physical location but on loving relationships.

A church, in its most basic form, is comprised of a few believers who are committed to the risen Lord Jesus and one another and, as a result, meet together with a view to grow in Christ and minister to others.

When an unmarried adulterer or an adulterous person and his/her spouse “leave” a church to meet regularly with others for the purpose of growing in Christ, another church is actually being formed.

In the study titled [*Church – Do You Know What It Means?*](#), the following is stated, “When a believer decides to leave or join a church, another building or meeting location is often in mind. In the New Testament, however, church is never linked to a building even though there is often a building in which a church may meet. With relationships in mind, when you ‘leave a church to join another,’ you depart from one group of believers in order to meet with and be in relationship with another group of believers. This is much more significant than merely leaving one worship service to begin attending another. There is also an aspect of ‘leaving or joining a church’ that is often overlooked. If you had the time, giftedness, and interest, you could be in a number of churches simultaneously. You do not have to ‘completely’ leave a church in which you now participate in order to be a functioning member of another church.”

With the above paragraph in mind, a husband and wife struggling in the aftermath of a spouse's adulterous behavior never really “leave” the church. They are simply meeting with other believers whom they already know from their church family. This small group (actually a “new” church) is formed either to help a sexually immoral single person grow in Christ or is originally birthed to assist members of a broken marriage be restored to Christ and one another. The

goal of a “new” church in this situation is not to replace the “old” church but, instead, is a ministry extension of the “old” church with a divinely sovereign existence of its own.

WILL AN ADULTEROUS PERSON EVER RETURN TO THE “OLD” CHURCH?

To reiterate the concept stated above, a person never really “left” his/her former church but has been meeting with members of the “old” church in a different setting. The decision, however, to “return” to the former church (usually a larger group for worship gatherings) is a “body decision.” In other words, everyone in the current “new” church (a smaller group, in all probability) should be involved in prayerfully making this decision. Church leaders in the “former” church should be consulted as well. And, IF the former adulterous partner is part of the “former” church, then that person (and, if married, the spouse as well) would have input regarding this “return” to fellowship. This type of decision-making process is certainly more in line with “body ministry” than one person making a self-oriented decision that could conceivably impact dozens (even hundreds) of fellow believers.

With such interaction and prayerful consideration among so many believers, it may seem as if it would be impossible for former adulterous people ever to fellowship again where people they have hurt and sinned against are also present. In all honesty, it would be difficult . . . but, by God’s grace, not impossible.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21, From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The above passage may be understood to mean that former partners in adultery, after some period of time dedicated to spiritual restoration and growth in Christ, will “return” to the same church and be in larger group gatherings once again. That outcome may or may not occur, and either outcome could be biblically supported and Christ-honoring in specific situations. Believers should remember and remind one another that God’s mercy and power are more than sufficient to spiritually restore anyone overtaken in sinful behavior. At the same time, there are consequences that cannot be overlooked or erased.

See [*Sorrows that Last a Lifetime*](#)

Never underestimate the schemes of the devil; he is always lurking to see whom He can devour (1 Peter 5:8). When tempted by adultery or any other sin, the most effective action any believer can take is to submit to God, resist the devil (James 4:7) flee self-gratifying sin, and pursue Christ-likeness with fellow believers (2 Timothy 2:22). When believers consistently flee from evil and faithfully rely on God’s abiding love and power (Romans 8:31-39, 1 John 4:4), Christ will be glorified and, as a result, believers in a church family will not have to deal with adultery in their midst.

1 Peter 5:8, Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

James 4:7, Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

2 Timothy 2:22, So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

Romans 8:31-39, What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

1 John 4:4, Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

The eventual outcomes from adulterous partners being in the same church cannot be predicted. What can be anticipated, however, is that God will eventually bring all things together so that He receives glory, and believers formerly involved in adultery or other believers impacted by this sin can continue to grow in Christ (Romans 8:28-30).

Romans 8:28-30, And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.