

# A Pastoral Framework for Infidelity Counseling

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## Abstract

Marital restoration from infidelity follows the biblical pattern of Christian discipleship, involving specific action steps and progress of insight in a relational context. The teaching of Jesus that adultery comes from the heart provides a central guiding insight for conceptualizing infidelity and marital restoration. A framework is presented for the varied helping efforts required for the spouse who was unfaithful, for the spouse who was betrayed, and for the marriage.

## Keywords

*Pastoral counseling, infidelity, adultery, affairs, marriage counseling, divorce, marital reconciliation*

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**C**ontrary to commonly cited statistics, most first marriages do not end in divorce. Though estimates vary, it is likely also true that most marriages survive infidelity.<sup>1</sup> There is much reason for hope. Many times, the work of pastoral care and counseling after infidelity is analogous to medical interventions after a heart attack. Most people survive heart attacks. But the care provided in the aftermath has great consequences for the person's long-term health. So it is with marriage. A marriage may not be killed by an affair, but it needs urgent help, followed by wise care over time.

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<sup>1</sup> See Wayne Grudem, *What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 10–13.

Therefore, a pastoral framework is called for that will provide the holistic care that a family needs in the aftermath of infidelity. After establishing brief foundations for a philosophy of pastoral care, this essay considers infidelity in a modern context. Then, the concerns and care for each spouse, as well as the marriage, are considered. A central guiding theme is drawn from the words of Jesus that all grievous sins, and adultery specifically by name, come from the heart. Ministry to couples after infidelity must be skilled work on the heart.

## **I. Foundations**

Pastoral theology as a discipline has always sought to answer the problems of the day with ancient words still relevant. This task requires application to people and problems, so it builds on systematic biblical teaching on what a person is, what a marriage is, and what a church is. The work is always interdisciplinary, not separating what God has brought together. To craft pastoral theology today in an historic Protestant perspective is to work from one ultimate authority, the Bible. Although biblical studies naturally takes a primary role, it does not exist in isolation. All interpreters work from a confessional framework, though not all give us the courtesy of writing out that confession or working within one of the church's historic statements of faith. Interpretation is always theological. Beyond biblical studies, therefore, theological anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and ethics are all relevant to this complex task of marital restoration. Wise pastoral care and counseling will also pursue humility by engaging two additional conversation partners: pastoral theology and psychology.

Both are useful in different ways. Engaging the pastoral theology tradition works against the blind spots particular to every age. The project of theological retrieval has received strong attention in recent years in general, and increasingly in the fields of pastoral care and counseling.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is still generally true that there is a lack of historical consciousness in evangelical counseling resources. This need not be the case, because Christians have carefully studied people and problems from the church's earliest days. Pastors saw themselves as physicians of the soul, knew human maladies well, and left a corpus with both conceptualizations of problems and methodologies to treat them.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for the preeminent example, the works of the late Thomas Oden. However, within biblical counseling and Christian psychology circles there are also examples of scholars engaged in this effort, such as Robert Roberts, Eric Johnson, Dennis Okholm, Kent Dunnington, Bob Kelleman, and Mark Deckard.

Engaging modern psychology similarly helps the counselor avoid other kinds of blind spots, especially in its extensive case knowledge and observation of trends in infidelity. This knowledge is not, according to Cornelius Van Til, uninterpreted brute facts.<sup>3</sup> Christians who have been most critical of efforts to integrate psychological science and Christian ministry have, nonetheless, long conceded that observations and descriptions from psychology are especially valuable. Yet it has not always been demonstrated how to best leverage those resources to strengthen the care pastors and counselors provide. David Powlison's epistemology treated extrabiblical sources in this way: both psychology and the history of pastoral care play a *provocative* rather than *constitutive* role because the Bible has unique authority, necessity, and sufficiency.<sup>4</sup> All extrabiblical sources, Christian or secular, are valuable to the extent that they provoke deeper engagement with biblical truth. This epistemological perspective guides engagement with voices from Christian history and psychology. With this foundation in place, it is now possible to consider the challenge of infidelity.

## II. *The Pressing Need*

Infidelity matters because the ideal of committed marital love is precious and good. Infidelity happens because people fall short of this ideal. Humanity lives in a fallen state, bearing the marks of both the original created blessedness and a cursedness that infects every area of life under the sun (cf. Eccl 1:9). Sin is not new, yet every age has unique challenges. In an effort to explain why “happy people” cheat, Esther Perel says,

Never before have our expectations of marriage taken on such epic proportions. We still want everything the traditional family was meant to provide—security, respectability, property, and children—but now we also want our partner to love us, to desire us, to be *interested* in us. We should be best friends and trusted confidants, and passionate lovers.

She continues, “We want our chosen one to offer stability, safety, predictability, and dependability.” Yet “we want that very same person to supply awe, mystery, adventure, and risk.”<sup>5</sup> In this context, vulnerability to infidelity

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Cornelius Van Til, *Christian—Theistic Evidences*, Defense of Biblical Christianity 6 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 51, and John M. Frame, *Cornelius van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 180–81.

<sup>4</sup> See David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2010), 151.

<sup>5</sup> Esther Perel, “Why Happy People Cheat,” *The Atlantic*. October 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/why-happy-people-cheat/537882/>; see also Esther Perel,

comes not from marriage being so difficult but from it being insufficient to carry the freight given it. Fallen human marriage falters under these burdens.

Understanding the logic of infidelity, the processes by which evil takes root and bears fruit, enables various Christian helpers to respond thoroughly, see bad fruit disposed of, and go further still, cutting down the tree and grinding up the roots. The helpers called upon to respond typically include pastors, counselors, family, and friends, and they each have valuable roles. Each role functions best within a unified biblical framework.

### III. *A Biblical Vision*

A foundation for restoration from infidelity can be drawn from the apostle Peter's call to believers in his second epistle:

Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. (2 Pet 1:5–9 NIV)

“Make every effort” indicates the need to take concrete action steps to grow. However, this character growth includes *knowledge* in addition to faith, goodness, and the rest. All of these qualities make knowledge effective or productive (v. 8), which is the opposite of spiritual-sounding knowledge devoid of fruit. Effective knowledge of Christ means a life increasingly formed into the image of the Lord Jesus. To fall short of this character progression requires suppression of the knowledge of the core Christian message. “Nearsightedness” and “blindness” are the metaphors Peter draws upon. What is lost from sight is their having “been cleansed from their past sins” (v. 9), and this loss hinders progress in the listed virtues. In the context of these virtues, adultery is merely one dramatic example of their opposite vices. This character growth is not only a personal improvement project. Efforts to grow in holiness always exist within a relational context of close connection to God and others, and they extend to the whole church. Every believer is on a growth trajectory. Discipleship principles provide guidance in different ways to both spouses after infidelity. This

foundation frames the help required for three parties: the offender, the offended, and the marriage.

#### **IV. *Help for the Offender***

The central insight for restoration can be drawn from the words of Jesus: adultery comes from the heart (Matt 15:19; 5:27–28). Jesus points within the person, so understanding the particulars of the path that led to getting lost will be relevant for finding the pathway home. The interventions of insight-oriented reflection, study, and counseling are not directly what the apostle Peter means by warning against losing insight, forgetting the forgiveness of sins in Jesus, and being unproductive in the knowledge of the Lord. This particular effort of insight instead follows the guidance of Paul to not be outwitted by the adversary but instead to be cognizant of his schemes (2 Cor 2:11). What are these schemes, then?

##### **1. *The Psychology of an Affair***

This psychology or logic of an affair is often not immediately apparent. What is typically visible are protective barriers, such as defensiveness or the spiritual language of quick and full deliverance. Getting past these protections exposes at least two categories of motivation.

*Type One: Running toward.* One cluster of motivations provides fuel for a person running toward the affair. This experience is a mix of resentment and entitlement. Resentment is not a necessary consequence of suffering but a *reaction* to suffering. People are sometimes more vulnerable to affairs in times of great despair, but vulnerability often occurs in times of the subtler suffering of boredom, listlessness, and purposelessness. Although these feelings can emerge in any marriage, not everyone turns their marital pain into marital resentment. Resentment fosters entitled behaviors. The pattern can also go in reverse order. For example, one spouse may spend long weeknight hours at the gym or with friends, while the other spouse is home with children. This pattern of entitlement does not remain contained but grows and expands to the use of money and sex for self-seeking purposes. Entitlement in these cases is more fundamental than pain or resentment, yet the presence of pain or resentment is useful because it provides justification and permission to take steps toward infidelity. Then, in the process of marital reconciliation, those marital sufferings and resentments are often weaponized to blame the betrayed spouse.

The suffering of a difficult marriage may not be a main driver of infidelity, at least in the cultural context of the United States at this time. As Perel

says, “Affairs are not what they used to be because marriage is not what it used to be”—rather, she continues, “So often, the most intoxicating ‘other’ that people discover in an affair is not a new partner; it’s a new self.”<sup>6</sup> It is not so much a new marriage but “a new me” that is so tempting. Shirley Glass, in her popular book on infidelity, saw a similar trend:

A compelling aspect of emotional affairs is the positive mirroring that occurs. We like how we see ourselves reflected in the other person’s eyes. By contrast, in our long-term relationships, our reflection is like a 5x makeup mirror in which our flaws are magnified. In a new romance, our reflection is like the rosy glow of an illuminated vanity mirror.<sup>7</sup>

In marriage, spouses regularly face their imperfections. But in a new relationship, people see themselves not as irritating or boring but as exciting and attractive. Infidelity often arises in the context of the desire to regain a sense of self—a desirable or even admirable self. This is ironic because even in secular societies infidelity is one of the least admired sins. Yet the fantasy allures many. Perel captures this allure well, explaining, “It’s more about feeling sexy than having sex.” She quotes one woman who told her, “It makes me feel alive.” Here, the connection with entitlement remains, as Perel says: “We ... live in an age of entitlement; personal fulfillment, we believe, is our due. In the West, sex is a right linked to our individuality, our self-actualization, and our freedom.”<sup>8</sup> Christian counselors Tim Clinton and Mark Laaser similarly notice this trend: “Many adulterers think they are looking for love when, in fact, they are seeking to feel better about themselves.”<sup>9</sup> An affair is typically not first about sexual desire. An affair provides the opportunity to experience, in mind and body, the fantasy of having a different and more exciting life and of being a different and more exciting person. It is not uncommon for people to share the sentiment, “Everything else in life is for other people, but this one thing is for me.” This does not capture the motivation for every affair, but it is a common and powerful motivation.

*Type Two: Running Away.* A second category of motivation is a mix of fear and refuge seeking. Some find less resonance with the idea of entitlement because when they look back on when the affair occurred, they remember

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<sup>6</sup> Perel, “Why Happy People Cheat.”

<sup>7</sup> Shirley Glass, *Not “Just Friends”: Rebuilding Trust and Recovering Your Sanity after Infidelity* (New York: Atria, 2004), 45.

<sup>8</sup> Perel, “Why Happy People Cheat.”

<sup>9</sup> Tim Clinton and Mark Laaser, *The Quick-Reference Guide to Sexuality and Relationship Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 136.



feeling desperate, that they needed the forbidden relationship for survival. For example, a work colleague who served as a confidant can become a paramour during a time of major suffering, whether that be an illness that threatens one's children or the death of a parent. Other times it is not a loss or near miss but, as in Type One, the long slog of a difficult life. For example, those who serve as caretakers for family members, those with several young children, and those with burnout-inducing work lives feel weary. The affair then feels not so much like the spark of vitality in a dreary world (as in the entitlement pattern) as warmth to survive a blizzard. This experience of suffering makes one vulnerable to seeking false refuge and, to shift metaphors, drinking from the broken cistern. Sometimes people will say that prior to the affair, they felt like everything had been dry and dead for some time. Or they use the opposite metaphor and say they were drowning. Here entitlement does not come through in the same way because it does not always sound like "It's only fair that I have this" or "I deserve this," but rather "I need this" or "I can't live without this." It is no less misguided or entitled in a certain sense than in the pattern of overt entitlement, but it is a different internal logic, and so the unraveling of the problem works differently. Unlike the entitlement pattern, here people do not feel so wonderful about themselves or that their lives are now finally exciting. They feel a mountain of guilt and shame. The sentiment is, "I'm a terrible person for doing this, but I can't live without it." That shame often lingers long after the affair ends.<sup>10</sup>

This survey has covered common infidelity motivations and narratives. The central theme visible in each is the message of Jesus: adultery comes from within the person. The sufferings of life can be a context for infidelity but not the cause. The New Testament word often translated *temptation* (*peirasmos*) also carries the meaning of *testing* or *trial*. Two key components in all temptation are *affliction* and *allure*.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, a person who is tempted faces an attack or bombardment. On the other hand, part of the person wants it. As the apostle James says, "Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed" (Jas 1:14). After infidelity, offenders often point to the external context and resonate with what is called the "symptom theory." Yet treating infidelity as a symptom of

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<sup>10</sup> One variant of this experience includes cases where it appears that people replay the dynamics of their past traumatic suffering through successive affairs. Some elements of this essay may be applicable, but the experience is sufficiently complex to merit its own study.

<sup>11</sup> This principle of the allure and affliction of temptation is a thread throughout David Powlison's *Making All Things New: Restoring Joy to the Sexually Broken* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

marital dysfunction does not do justice to the Bible's teaching on the primacy of the heart. Seeking sources of culpability outside the person creates a major obstacle to restoration.

## **2. Overcoming Obstacles to Restoration**

The primary obstacle to restoration is a set of self-protective behaviors: minimization, denial, blame shifting, and defensiveness. The greatest aid to restoration is the opposite of each. Rather than minimization and denial, the person soberly considers the gravity of infidelity and speaks about its impact on one's relationship with God, spouse, and family. Rather than blame shifting and defensiveness, the person takes responsibility, owning the infidelity, the lies, and the whole pattern of life that supported the infidelity.

The Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) explains what infidelity entails and gives positive commands that are its opposite. Specifically, WLC 138 calls for "diligent labor in our callings" and "temperance" as two component parts in obeying the seventh commandment. First, productive engagement in one's calling is a wise antidote to the ennui that makes infidelity alluring for many. Second, temperance, a virtue broader than sexual restraint, locates infidelity as connected to other sins. For example, as seen in the virtue ethics tradition following Evagrius, Cassian, and Gregory, vices are interlocking and mutually sustaining. To turn away from adultery involves not only avoiding the sexual sins but also turning away the web of sins that enabled it and sustained it.<sup>12</sup> In this tradition, cultivating patience, endurance, and temperance is a prophylactic and cure for appetitive and addictive sins. To resist sexual sin requires temperance in food and alcohol, as well as in anger, so that one's manner of driving in traffic or talking to customer service representatives is a microcosm of the problem.

Nothing less than the cultivation of mature Christian character brings safety from falling back into infidelity, and nothing less than mature Christian character makes it possible to restore loving marriage and family relationships. Otherwise, immaturity leads to feeling victimized by spouses or children saying "ouch" and makes it impossible to appreciate the impact of infidelity and speak compassionately to those most hurt.<sup>13</sup> To grow in

<sup>12</sup> See Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 19, 33–34, and Dennis Okholm, *Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins: Learning from the Psychology of Ancient Monks* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2014), 14.

<sup>13</sup> This tendency is a natural extension of what made infidelity possible in the first place: "Self-deception can take the form of denying self-indulgent motives or refusing to acknowledge the potential damage. With practice, people find it easier to hide those unacceptable parts of themselves from themselves. They gloss over aspects that are inconsistent with their



character means being stronger, steadier, and more resistant to the winds that blow and threaten to take believers off course (Eph 4:11–16). None of this may be disconnected from the core gospel message. Progress in Peter's list of character qualities requires knowledge of Christ and his cleansing, and that knowledge is lived out precisely in these efforts toward holiness. God is the one who saves from sin, but he uses means.

A major part of growing in insight and character is confession. As Ed Welch says, "The fastest way to bring a wrecking ball to our skewed interpretations is through confession."<sup>14</sup> Yet this is fraught work because, often early on, the words of confession are thin. Many who have been unfaithful reflexively shift the blame. Michael White explains how one comes to take responsibility and recommends that counseling include the discovering and naming of cultural messages that were received and then over time were internalized and acted upon. For example, "What did you learn about sex growing up? What messages are in the world around us about sex?" Or, "What messages have you received about what to do with unhappiness?" This initial distancing of the messages from the person exposes the messages for what they are. It also allows counselors and pastors to establish collaborative relationships with people who are not taking responsibility yet, even though they say they are. Discovering the lies is a good precursor to owning what one has done in response to those internalized lies. "Responsibility," White says, "is the outcome of these explorations, not the starting point."<sup>15</sup>

White's approach echoes the method taken by Evagrius of Pontus, who offers ways to combat an extensive list of messages suggested to believers, whether by demons or the believer's own fallen heart.<sup>16</sup> Evagrius highlighted the message or the lie and answered every message with Scripture. This approach of uncovering and talking back to the messages offers a way forward for helpers to get past the defenses in a less directly combative manner. It invites the helper to come alongside the fallen brother or sister and look outside at the messages or lies they were sold. This method does not deviate from Jesus's teaching of adultery coming from the heart but rather supplements it with the perspective of sin as a prowling and attacking force in Genesis 4:7, in the Lord's warning to Cain: "Sin is crouching at your door."

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internalized values. They tell themselves that what they are doing isn't so bad, that everybody does it and life goes on," (Glass, *Not Just Friends*, 63).

<sup>14</sup> Edward Welch, *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2012), 91.

<sup>15</sup> Michael White, *Narrative Practice: Continuing the Conversations* (New York: Norton, 2011), 103.

<sup>16</sup> Evagrius of Pontus, *Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).

Sin is internal, but in some sense it is also external, and there is rhetorical value in externalizing the problem. Pastors and counselors are realistic, though, about the effectiveness of any technique; as the old hymn says, “All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down; brethren, pray!”<sup>17</sup> All this work depends on spiritual intervention, and helping a person leave behind defensiveness and take responsibility often takes time.

This time of working past defenses and blame shifting remains connected to the ongoing work of facilitating confession. The confession to one’s spouse should occur in at least two parts. The first should be a plain admission of the sin. The second will be most effective if delayed. As White explains, “The idea of an apology will be meaningless until significance is attributed to the consequences.”<sup>18</sup> The Old Testament prophets teach that certain conditions must be met with the seeking of forgiveness. Coming to God with bare words has no value if the people have no willingness to own the severity or consequences of their sins. If they are not prepared to rend their hearts, they need not rend their garments (Joel 2:13). This principle applies both vertically and horizontally, with both God and the betrayed spouse and children.

This ability to grieve one’s sins and speak empathetically about their impact on others is a key fruit of repentance. The more communication contains no attacks or defensiveness, the more likely it is that marital counseling and reconciliation efforts will be effective. The change will be visible and far-reaching. As Archibald Alexander said, “Christians, when recovered from backsliding, are commonly more watchful, and walk more circumspectly than they ever did before. They cannot but be more humble.”<sup>19</sup>

## **V. Help for the Offended**

Pastoral care appropriately locates the problem in the heart of the person who committed infidelity and not in the betrayed spouse; therefore, pastoral energy is typically directed toward the person who was unfaithful. The unintended side effect is that, from a pastoral care standpoint, betrayed spouses commonly feel neglected in their suffering. What does the betrayed spouse need from the church? The specific help and healing needed become clearer as the nature of the wound becomes clearer.

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<sup>17</sup> George Akin, “Brethren, We Have Met to Worship,” (1817) *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: Great Commission Publication, 1990), #381.

<sup>18</sup> White, *Narrative Practice*, 106.

<sup>19</sup> Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 175.

### 1. *The Need for Clarity amid Confusion*

The disclosure of an affair affects people in very different ways. Some experience the disclosure as clarifying and vindicating because they long suspected they were being misled and they finally have proof. Although disclosure is commonly experienced as traumatic (as in the section below), some initially feel a small relief: “I knew I wasn’t crazy. And to think my spouse accused *me* of being suspicious!” This also sparks feelings of injustice and anger. Before, the active deception fostered confusion, disorientation, or even guilt. Now, having the truth is validating, but it does not take away the need for validation from helpers. Here, the bridled righteous indignation of a friend or pastor validates suffering and often feels further clarifying and sanity giving. God is displeased with betrayal; helpers are too. This empathic response solidifies the betrayed spouse’s feeling that this sin was indeed serious. The spouse is then better prepared for various unhelpful pressures.

*Pressure from spouse.* Some betrayed spouses are persuaded to minimize and take blame for the affair, to feel pressure to now be sexually intimate more frequently, to avoid sharing grievances or “being negative,” to do better with money or the house, to research marital resources, to schedule counseling, or to lead the restoration plan. In the wake of an affair, these pressures are inappropriate and damaging. In cases that follow the entitlement pattern, when spouses or pastors give in to the unfaithful spouse’s narrative, it only affirms unfaithful spouses in self-centeredness and assists them in sustaining their mode of blame shifting. In addition to the pressure connected to blame shifting, some unfaithful spouses will even seek to enforce strict silence on the other, as though the presence of a single apology now renders the offended party voiceless in the matter and no family, friends, or church leaders can or should know about the affair. Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson answer this question wisely: “Can you ever mention the sin[s] again?” Yes, they argue, by “bringing them up for [the offender’s] good.”<sup>20</sup> Sensitive believers who have been betrayed will often find themselves willing to accept this pressure and rush to full reconciliation without yet observing sustained repentance. They long for a testimony of a reconciled marital relationship. They desperately pray for a story of redemption for the marriage. They want to be able to say, “Look at what the Lord has done!” They often pray, “Wouldn’t I be able to glorify you more through a story of a rescued marriage?” This pressure to reconcile quickly is intensified by insensitive comments often made to betrayed spouses.

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<sup>20</sup> Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson, *Resolving Everyday Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 94–95.

*Pressure from others.* The “takes two to tango” and “always a two-way street” comments commonly expressed suggest that many believe that underlying marital problems are the primary cause of infidelity. Even worse is the idea that a deficiency in the betrayed spouse primarily drives infidelity. Perel takes exception to the prevailing theory that infidelity is merely a symptom of a diseased marriage, naming two faulty underlying principles. The first is that lust can take hold, even if a marriage is good. Second, “infidelity does not always correlate neatly with marital dysfunction.”<sup>21</sup> She is right that both principles are faulty. Sex in marriage is a help, but it cannot be one’s hope; spouses provide care, but no cure. Paul’s affirmation of the usefulness of marital intimacy must not be taken past its intent (1 Cor 7:1–7). Further, although infidelity often occurs amid challenging marital dynamics, moral failure can happen in one spouse independent of the other. What a gift it is, then, when a pastor or friend affirms the words of Jesus that adultery comes from the heart (Matt 19:9). No marital dynamic however ugly, no grievance however valid, and no problem in the spouse however extreme justifies an affair as the next step.

Another pressure exists in two forms. One is to reconcile quickly and not choose divorce, even in the absence of observable fruit of repentance. Another pressure is to move quickly to divorce. Both perspectives unhelpfully pressure the betrayed spouse. Helpful guidance will not only avoid blaming the betrayed spouse for the infidelity but will also resist binding the conscience on whether and on what timetable to reconcile. It cannot be said that divorce in this context is wrong on a particular timeline or is antithetical to forgiveness, because Scripture grants permission for divorce after adultery. Yet restoration is a beautiful thing. Even Bible scholars who offer the most robust defense of there being true biblical grounds for divorce recognize that the dominant thread going through Scripture is to encourage believers to cultivate lifelong marriages.<sup>22</sup> God often works miraculous healing in these circumstances, and a decision of this magnitude merits an unhurried prayerful time of decision.

It is possible to reconcile prematurely. The risk is of surface reconciliation without sustained repentance. As many have observed, God does not restore closeness of fellowship with unrepentant people; God’s people cannot,

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<sup>21</sup> Perel, “Why Happy People Cheat.”

<sup>22</sup> For example, David Instone-Brewer takes a broader view of biblical grounds than the majority Protestant tradition, yet he still maintains that “Jesus and Paul ... discouraged divorce even for valid grounds” and “emphasized ways to stay married rather than ways to divorce.” See David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), ix, 302.

either. Wise pastoral care follows the teaching of Jesus in upholding the creational ideal of a lifelong marriage, while also maintaining this clarity: permission truly is permission. Two principles must be held together. First, marital restoration is a good and worthy goal to which we give our best efforts, and in God's kindness, many, or even most households are restored after infidelity. Second, some fires burn the house down, some spouses are unrepentant after infidelity, and sometimes divorce is mercy.

## **2. The Need for Care amid Chaos**

Although some betrayed spouses experience clarity and anger with the disclosure of an affair, for others it is more immediately traumatic. The life that had existed before, the reality that had been present, the sense of what is up and what is down—all of this has now been shattered. Perel says,

The maelstrom of emotions unleashed in the wake of an affair can be so overwhelming that many psychologists turn to the field of trauma to explain the symptoms: obsessive rumination, hypervigilance, numbness and dissociation, inexplicable rages, uncontrollable panic.<sup>23</sup>

Like soldiers returning from war and feeling instant panic when they hear a car backfire, spouses who have been betrayed in marriage can likewise experience profound disturbances when reminders or anniversaries of the disclosure occur. Walking past pictures in the house from the time before or during the betrayal can be greatly upsetting.

To the extent that betrayal trauma functions like other traumas, it calls for patient care over time to bring the broken memories back together. In Diane Langberg's summary, the initial way forward after traumatic suffering involves "talking, tears, and time."<sup>24</sup> The months after the disclosure are typically the most emotionally intense. Although separation in general is not a therapeutic next step for addressing basic marital troubles, separation after infidelity may provide two constructive benefits. First, it may provide the distance for the offended party to regain stability and begin healing. Second, it may provide an appropriate consequence that communicates the severity of the broken trust. In some cases, there is no need for separation, or it is as short as a weekend.<sup>25</sup> In others, it is an occasional night requested

<sup>23</sup> Perel, "Why Happy People Cheat."

<sup>24</sup> See Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2015), 146–53.

<sup>25</sup> I have observed this, for example, when the offending spouse was humble and communicative, and the couple were able to immediately spend many nights talking and working hard on the restoration process. Also, at times minimal separation occurs even when the offending spouse is not humble or repentant because of the heavy burdens of single parenting.

apart during the worst of the pain, and in still others, it becomes indefinite, based more upon the presence of the fruits of repentance than upon the completion of a set period of time.

During the initial weeks after disclosure, intrusive thoughts and urgency to make sense of it all can be overwhelming, and it becomes difficult to think about anything else. So, as the early intensity begins to fade and the demands of life return, some find it helpful to cordon off the ruminating and instead protect a little time on purpose each day or throughout the week to reflect, journal, or pray. This is also the time for building a support network of people for the difficult days ahead. Although some of the work of retelling the life story and putting the pieces back together can be particularly valuable in the context of professional counseling, pastoral care also has a significant role to play, especially on some of the questions that are very pressing: “What does God think of this? Where was God in all of this? What is my life and marriage, if not what I thought it was?” For centuries, Christian leaders have mined the Scriptures for wisdom on these questions and have much to offer, especially by way of guiding in prayerful lament (e.g., Pss 42; 55–56; 102).

At times, though, pastoral care encounters an impediment connected to gender dynamics. Of course, both men and women have affairs. Yet, anecdotally, the common crisis presented to a pastor is that of an unfaithful husband and a betrayed wife. A male pastor or elder in the church then provides a high level of interventive care for a male offender, and frequently a betrayed wife feels forgotten. Yet even if church leaders and friends sometimes feel they have little to say by way of solutions for such grave suffering, they are an invaluable help. After the initial six to twelve weeks of the crisis, when pastoral contact often is more frequent, the value of even a monthly phone call from a church leader to check in and pray for the betrayed spouse should not be underestimated.

## **VI. *Help for the Marriage***

Although infidelity is not merely a symptom of a marital problem, that point can be misapplied in a way that complicates the work of marital restoration. Here is where the difficulty lies. On the one hand, adultery is one person’s fault, and so marriage counseling must begin with this conviction as a foundational principle and resist blame shifting. On the other hand, the process of marriage counseling is not effective when one spouse remains the sole perpetrator and the other is the sole victim. Marriage counseling becomes productive when each can say, “I have suffered in this marriage,



but I have also contributed to the distance or challenges in this marriage.” In Mike Emlet’s phrase, in Christ people are “saints, sufferers, [and] sinners.”<sup>26</sup> Effective counseling addresses all three. But because a betrayed spouse was not a “coperpetrator” of the affair, there is a danger of counseling taking the tone of being *for* one person and *against* the other. Is marital counseling after infidelity consigned to being a two-on-one effort, the helper in alliance with the betrayed spouse to change the other? The short answer is no, but the first of the two stages of marital counseling is vulnerable to the charge of imbalance.

### **1. Stage One: Appreciating the Impact**

In the first stage, the offending spouse begins the process of appreciating the impact of infidelity. Progress is observable when offending spouses are able to speak about their spouse’s pain without turning it into a conversation about their own pain and directing their attention back to themselves. That can occur when the pain they feel about their own sin overshadows their spouse’s pain, overtaking their ability to sit with their spouse’s pain and express compassion. This obstacle is difficult to overcome but is addressed through redirection and encouragement toward bringing that pain to the Lord and to others. But the priority of this stage is for offending spouses to pay attention to the pain of their spouse.

This process of discovering and speaking about the impact functions best in a cyclical way. Spouses who have been unfaithful first prayerfully reflect on the impact of infidelity, studying the harm it caused and taking a few notes. They then share the fruits of reflection with a wise friend, pastor, or counselor, inviting feedback: “Is there anything I’m saying that gives you the impression that I don’t get it or that I’m minimizing?” Honest feedback then leads to more prayerful reflection. Then they speak with their spouse, asking, “Am I getting closer to understanding what this has done to you? Would you tell me if anything I said doesn’t quite get it?” Then, with the benefit of their spouse’s feedback, they can go through the cycle again: reflection, friend’s feedback, and then more reflection prior to sharing again with the spouse, receiving the spouse’s feedback, and so on. When the betrayed spouse can respond, “I do believe you really get it now” and desires to move forward in concerted reconciliation efforts, the first stage has reached a close.

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<sup>26</sup> Michael R. Emlet, *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners: Loving Others as God Loves Us* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2021).

Yet the need to appreciate the impact does not entirely end. The topic of infidelity will come up at various points over the coming years, and it is generally best when those conversations are proactive, initiated by the spouse who has been unfaithful. This spouse will offer conversation when reminders arise, for example, when infidelity comes up in a sermon, or when a TV show that the couple had otherwise enjoyed takes a plot twist related to infidelity. This spouse will frequently ask, “How was it for you when that reminder happened? Would you like to talk about it?” This proactive, sensitive communication effectively builds marital trust and closeness in the years beyond the second stage.

## ***2. Stage Two: Mutual Rebuilding***

The transition to this stage is delicate but hopeful. In Perel’s words, an affair is a “disorder that may actually lead to a new order.”<sup>27</sup> An affair is a fire that burns the house down. However, planning a rebuild often exposes structural problems or fire hazards in the old house. These problems meant vulnerability and risk for the marriage, and when the person who was unfaithful lit the match, it burned and was devastated. Wise rebuilding means not repeating the original design but building something new. And so in this process of rebuilding the house, counseling becomes more mutual. It does not require locating offenses of equal magnitude in the betrayed spouse to do this work. It is sufficient for the betrayed spouse to adopt a new mindset: “We were both cocreators of a problematic status quo that included some distance, bad conflict patterns, and vulnerabilities.”

In this second stage, the tasks of marriage counseling are possible and productive. The first stage provided the opportunity, especially in the context of counseling, to foster an environment of grace and safety in the marriage, where honest confession and vulnerability could be well stewarded. This process builds an initial working level of trust and creates the conditions for trust to continue to be built. In the second stage, a wise counselor can begin, then, to help the couple discover longstanding patterns of distance and closeness, conflict and repair. The couple may discover that when one pursues, the other often withdraws, or when one attacks, the other defends, or when one withdraws, the other also withdraws. They may discover that they frequently miss the other’s repair attempts or do not know how to de-escalate or regulate their own intense emotions or to remain steady and present when the other spouse experiences the more intensely painful

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<sup>27</sup> Esther Perel, quoted in “How Can Couples Rebuild Trust after an Affair?,” *TED Radio Hour*, NPR, May 15, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/406455947>.

emotions. Counseling helps a couple uncover those conflict patterns and disrupt them. The disrupting at first typically involves slowing down and noticing or pointing out in retrospect, for example, “Was that a time when we do that pattern of me going away emotionally when I’m afraid I’ve disappointed you?”

The tone of these new patterns is similar to what the couples learned from stage one. They now find it easier to see the impact of their words or actions, often asking, “What message was playing in your mind when I said that?” or “Regardless of my intention, when I said that, you felt misunderstood and alone in your pain, and you were worried that I didn’t even care. I hate that my words had that effect, and I’m so sorry. I want you to leave our conversations feeling the exact opposite—I want to understand you and be with you when things are hard.” When the couple is, over time, better able to repair their conflicts and regain closeness with minimal guidance from the counselor, the formal process of marriage counseling can be drawn to a close, or meetings can be reduced in frequency.

This condensed description of the process of marriage counseling follows the pattern of the love of Jesus evidenced on the cross. He repairs the breach at his own cost, which leads to closeness. Elements of this process are also consistent with the work of Sue Johnson’s couples counseling model.<sup>28</sup> Although Johnson connects her work with her understanding of Jesus’s method of caring for people, the model in itself does not include a robust understanding of sin and forgiveness and of the need for divine redemption. Johnson does see two principles about how relationships work: specifically, how humility and burden-bearing function.

First, putting aside intentions and dealing with the impact of one’s actions requires humility. The temptation remains to require a spouse to respond to one’s noble intention rather than accepting the spouse’s experience of the actual words and actions. However, there is no room for ego in relational repair. Second, the burden-bearing ministry in a marriage follows the model of the love of God. God alone is our ultimate refuge and strength, so marital love aspires to be a small but meaningful echo of that refuge and strength. As Powlison often said, God is the sun, and the human helper is just a 40-watt light bulb; yet in a dark world, a small light can make all the difference. Loving spouses want to offer this care. Many of the destructive actions in marital conflict occur when one or both spouses are

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<sup>28</sup> See Susan M. Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy: Creating Connection* (New York: Routledge, 2004); cf. Winston T. Smith, review of *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy: Creating Connection*, by Susan M. Johnson, *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26.1 (2012): 54–56.

in a mode of self-protection—or, in common parlance, the response of fight, flight, or freeze. It is a kindness and mercy to offer refuge or safety to one's spouse who is escalated and fearful. To help one another mutually become calmed, heard, and comforted is to give a soft answer that turns away wrath. This posture is nothing less than the blessed mode of peace-making. Spouses who serve one another in this way demonstrate their belonging as children in the family of God (Matt 5:9).

## **VII. *The Noble Work of the Heart***

That most people survive heart attacks speaks more to the advancement of modern medicine than to the severity of heart attacks. Severe conditions are life threatening without proper intervention. Many who survive are walking heart attacks living in peril. Likewise, that marriages frequently survive after infidelity does not always mean they are well. Many couples attend church with marriages in hidden peril, desperately needing intervention. Just as a heart attack is followed by years of visits to the cardiologist, the ongoing sustaining of spiritual health after an affair is a years-long process.

Christians have long known that infidelity restoration is not a quick fix. Although Protestants disagree with much of the penitential tradition, the early manuals record useful case wisdom on this point. In these texts it is rare to see a restoration process shorter than several years for infidelity, and for those who fell from a place of great spiritual leadership, it could be up to twelve years.<sup>29</sup> Pastors and counselors today do well to consider the weightiness and duration of the restoration process. Adultery is truly a grave sin. If it takes years to become an expert in cardiology, physicians of the soul must likewise plan to refine their craft over time. The church fathers certainly believed that being spiritual doctors of the heart was harder.<sup>30</sup> These heart matters are no less complex, no less consequential, and no less worthy of the church's best efforts. However, the fruit of these labors, like those of modern cardiology, are sweet. In God's kindness, those efforts lead to extended years of rich, restored life in the family.

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, "The Penitential of Columbanus," in *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal "Libri Poenitentiales" and Selections from Related Documents*, ed. John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 250–57.

<sup>30</sup> See Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 2.16, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, rev. and ed. Kevin Knight (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1894), <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310202.htm>.