

Why Repentance May Be Reason for Retention

By Ted Kober, Senior Ambassador



Ambassadors
of
Reconciliation™

This article is from the series “Supervision Issues in Christian Ministry.”¹

“I was wrong. Will you forgive me?”

When a professional ministry worker² confesses a significant offense, should he automatically be terminated?

After all, who would trust a leader who openly admits his weakness?

Our most natural response might be, “Well, if he messed up, he’s no longer qualified to serve.”



As a Christian mediator, I have witnessed many key ministry staff members confess their wrongs in front of their accusers as well as those who supervise them. In fact, I have seen pastors confess to entire congregations, seeking forgiveness while expecting to be removed from office.

Pastor Nathan trembled as he read his prepared confession before the church. He acknowledged what opponents accused him for doing. He owned his sin, including misusing his pastoral authority in venting anger during sermons. He even revealed two of the underlying heart issues that led to his behaviors. Pastor Nathan confessed he had betrayed the congregation’s trust in calling him, and he accepted that this could lead to his removal as pastor. With tears, he asked for forgiveness. Led by the mediator, supporters and adversaries alike cried as they read together God’s Word proclaiming forgiveness: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24 ESV).

The congregation overwhelmingly expressed support for Pastor Nathan, and by God’s grace he retained his position.

Amazing thing about repentance – it *moves* people. Not just those confessing, but also those who witness it. People recognize the

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¹ See related articles at <https://www.aorhope.org/articles>. Illustrations are drawn from actual cases. However, names and details have been altered to protect confidences.

² When I use the term “professional ministry worker,” I mean to include those who serve as pastors and other church staff, teachers and administrators in Christian schools, and key employees of other Christian ministries.

miracle of repentance, especially when the penitent is willing to accept the consequences. Repentance is a powerful demonstration of faith, not in one's self, but in God and His promises. As a result, many ministry workers who have repented have been retained in their positions.

But does admission of sin disqualify someone from service in a Christian ministry? Or, does an act of repentance actually better qualify someone to serve in a Christian ministry?

The answer to both questions is, "It depends."

Why Retain a Repentant Sinner?

If someone admits his failure, that should disqualify him for service in a Christian ministry, right? After all, God requires leaders among His disciples to be *above reproach, self-controlled, respectable, and able to teach. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders* (see 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 8-13³).

Do these biblical qualifications require then that a person must be sinless or at least nearly perfect as a good person can be? Scripture teaches that is impossible:

As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one" (Romans 3:10-12 ESV).

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it (James 2:10 ESV).

So, what do the biblical qualifications mean?

Since all people are sinners, perfection cannot be the standard. No matter how self-controlled and careful, people serving in Christian ministry will sin – against God, against one another, and against others outside the staff.

Repentance, then, becomes a key consideration because of its importance in reconciliation. Reconciliation (restoration of relationship) becomes possible when there is repentance including confession and forgiveness.

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God calls all His children to a lifestyle of reconciliation, even making it a priority over worship. In His sermon on the mount, Jesus said:

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift (Matthew 5:23-24 ESV).

Paul reinforces the importance of restoring relationships:

³ Although 1 Timothy 3:1-7 is directed toward "overseers" (pastors), note that deacons likewise must demonstrate similar characteristics (v. 8). All Christians are called to godly living. Those who serve as leaders are especially held accountable for their example in teaching others (see James 3:1).

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (Romans 12:18 ESV).

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:1-3 ESV).

James also urges reconciliation:

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed (James 5:16 ESV).

Those who repent and seek reconciliation express a living faith. Humility required with repentance keeps one above reproach. Those who confess and forgive, seeking restoration of relationships, practice self-control. People respect those who take responsibility for their own faults and freely forgive others.

In mentoring the young pastor Timothy, Paul exhorts him to be a living example:

Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.... Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Timothy 4:12, 16).

Paul exhorts Timothy to keep watch on both his personal life *and* teaching. They cannot be separated. A leader's behavior either supports or undermines his teaching because his example is a form of teaching.

Since no one is sinless, confessing one's offenses demonstrates life under the cross. People trust a leader who admits wrongs. It means that they can be honest with him about their own failures, and they need not fear unfair judgment. In fact, they can anticipate that he will show the grace and mercy that he has been given in Christ's forgiveness. As a result, this kind of leader teaches by his example.

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Even outsiders respect the confident leader who can admit when he's wrong. On the contrary, outsiders (and insiders!) rightly judge Christian leaders who are arrogant and self-righteous.

Let's explore why repentance may be reason for retaining a professional ministry worker.

- Repentance is a demonstration of one's faith in Jesus.
- Repentance is a sign of maturing in the faith and growth in godly wisdom.
- Repentance provides an example that others can follow.

Repentance an Act of Faith

Repentance comprises of two parts:

- First, contrition, that is, godly sorrow for sin. In contrast to mere remorse or worldly sorrow (2 Corinthians 7:10), contrition means standing in fear of the holy, almighty, omniscient God, realizing that the offense is not only against another human but a sin against our Creator's commands. (Note Matthew 10:28.)
- Second, faith in the Gospel. The sinner believes that God grants him forgiveness, not because of any merit or worthiness on his part, but because Jesus Christ paid the full punishment for sin. (See Mark 1:15.)

As result of this two-part process, the forgiven sinner responds in gratitude to his heavenly Father with good works. Good works are the fruit of repentance.

When a person acknowledges his sin and confesses it before God and others, he professes his faith that God's promises are true:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9 ESV).

The word confess literally means *to say the same thing*. When we confess our faith in the triune God, we say the same thing that God declares in His Word: the Father created us, the Son redeemed us, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies us. Our confession of faith affirms what God has said.

When we confess our sins, we also say the same thing that God declares in His Word: we are sinful people, conceived in sin and unable to do any good on our own. Thus, we have sinned against God in our thoughts, words, and actions, by what we have done and by what we have not done. We deserve nothing but God's wrath and punishment.

As we confess our sins to God and one another, we confess our faith in Jesus Christ and His forgiveness. We acknowledge that we need a Savior. We admit our wrongs because we believe in the hope of God's promises.

But the one who denies his sin also confesses faith – not in the one True God, but rather in himself. He claims to be righteous on his own merits, and thereby justifies his thoughts, words, and actions. He reveals trust not in Jesus but rather in himself. In other words, he denies the need for a Savior, he contradicts faith in Christ, and he renounces God's gift of forgiveness.

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Unrepentance is cause for dismissal of a staff member in a Christian ministry. Repentance, on the other hand, may be reason to retain a person in ministry. A person's confession of sin gives witness to a maturing faith in Jesus and the forgiveness of sins.

Anticipate Godly Growth

Repentance is an action of turning around. The change in direction is away from serving one's self and fulfilling one's desires above all to serving God and keeping His precepts. Such a

remarkable change often requires one to lay down his personal idols in exchange for the worship of the Triune God.

Jesus illustrates this dramatic redirection in the parable of the prodigal son. After he had squandered away his father's estate, the son came to his senses and returned to his father seeking mercy (a turning around). He expressed godly sorrow in accepting consequences for his sin as he pled, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."

In repentance, we name our sin and make a commitment to change. Contrition combines with faith to make this pledge, acknowledging our weakness and reliance upon Christ for walking in a new direction – a turning around. (Note Zacchaeus in Luke 19:8.)

Supervisors treasure the key staff member who humbles himself in confession, identifying the specific sin and promising to change. Maturity and wisdom come through personal growth, including repentance of serious offenses.

A Christian ministry leader who is maturing in faith and leadership is valued.

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Teacher by Example

Our example teaches. The Christian leader who denies sin and self-justifies teaches others how to live in self-righteousness. Conversely, the professional ministry worker who exemplifies humility in confession teaches others to live a life of repentance.

A pastor I greatly admire was that example for me. When faced with a valid criticism, he listened carefully, asking clarifying questions and seeking to understand his fault. Rather than try to explain his actions, he simply said, "I was wrong. Will you forgive me?"

It wasn't complicated. But neither is such humility easy! His regular example of admitting sin was powerful. He did not take responsibility that wasn't his. He did not admit wrong-doing just to please others. Nor did he defend himself because he was the pastor. Instead, when he realized his own failing, he stopped, listened, and confessed.

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Forgiveness and Consequences

God exhorts us to forgive as we have been forgiven:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint

against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive (Colossians 3:12-13 ESV).

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:29-32 ESV).

But does forgiveness remove consequences?

Yes and no.

God's forgiveness in Christ always removes the eternal consequences – eternal separation from God (Romans 8:1). But forgiveness does not always remove earthly consequences.

Moses was forgiven when he disobeyed God's order to speak to the rock for water. He struck the rock with his staff. We know Moses was forgiven because he appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. But Moses suffered an earthly consequence. After spending 40 years leading the children of Israel, he was not allowed to enter the promised land with them.

David was forgiven for his misuse of authority, his affair with Bathsheba, and his arranged murder of her husband Uriah (2 Samuel 11). Through the prophet Nathan, God forgave David (2 Samuel 12:13). But David suffered consequences for his sin: his and Bathsheba's son died, another son publicly took his wives, and the sword never departed from his house.

Because those who serve in leadership teach by their example, they are held to a higher accountability (James 3:1). While repentance is a godly example, the offense may be so significant that its harmful effects on other staff or people receiving ministry may be serious. Accordingly, ministry leaders who admit a major moral failing or other major public offense may need to experience earthly consequences, including losing their position.

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In one case, a professional ministry worker had embezzled tens of thousands of dollars from the ministry. He confessed and agreed to a payment plan of restitution, which would likely take years. Forgiveness was proclaimed to him. But, because his continued employment required him to handle funds including cash and would leave him vulnerable to temptation, he was terminated. Further, the funds he stole included money raised for helping children. If the ministry had not released him, some would have believed that the ministry minimized sin and was irresponsible in handling donations.

However, the ministry worked with their former employee to help get counseling and training for a new position. After a few years of making restitution payments, ministry leaders felt that consequences had served their purpose and forgave the rest of the debt. In other words, they applied both mercy and consequences.

In another situation, church lay leaders discovered that their pastor used the church computer to view and store pornography acquired from the Internet. In order to make storage available,

he even deleted church records. News spread quickly throughout the church and community. Immediate reactions ranged from firing him to not seeing a problem. A Christian mediator was called to intervene just before the congregational meeting to terminate him.

After much teaching to the church and counseling for the pastor, his wife, and church leaders, he confessed before the church. God's forgiveness was proclaimed to him. Together, the pastor and congregational leaders understood that his reputation in the church and community had deteriorated to the point where his ministry could not continue. (E.g., see 1 Timothy 3:2 and 7, *the husband of one wife and well thought of by outsiders.*)

Nevertheless, the church viewed their pastor not as someone to get rid of, but rather someone who needed their care. With his agreement, they released him from his call. But they provided six month's salary and benefits in gratitude for years of faithful service. They also provided financial support for marital counseling.

Denominational leadership restricted him from taking a new position unless certain conditions were met, including counseling for his addiction and his marriage. After meeting those criteria, he was allowed to serve again in another church with the requirement that his previous experience was disclosed to the new church's leadership. He could only serve as an associate pastor and would not have access to the Internet.

His marriage was strengthened, and his privilege to serve as a pastor was restored because of the fruit of his repentance and the mercy shown him by ecclesiastical supervision. The new church received a pastor who lived the faith he professed. The prior church grew and healed because of their biblical responses to the crisis.

I have seen numerous examples where ministry workers caused offense, repented, and were forgiven and retained. One pastor believed his public confession to his church was the end of his ministry. But his repentance actually became a new beginning for both him and his church as together they learned the power of the cross and Christ's forgiveness.

In each case where a ministry worker is retained, the decision is made not simply based on the repentance of the worker, but also the effect of termination or retention has on other staff and the people who benefit from the ministry's work.

Termination or Retention?

As I stated earlier, it depends. Issues to consider:

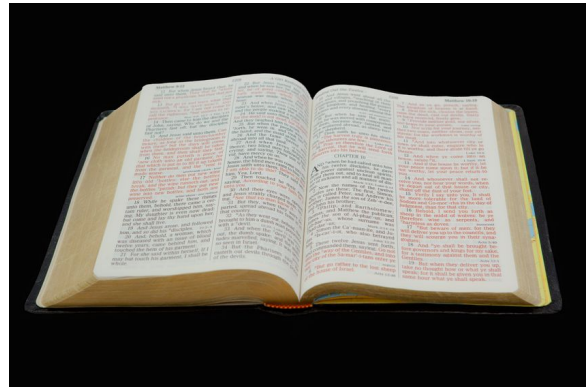
- How willing was the individual to repent?
 - Did he or she repent without outside pressure?
 - Did admission of fault only come upon damning evidence or insistence of witnesses?
- How well known is the offense and what are the impacts to others?
 - To other staff.
 - To the people benefiting from the ministry.
 - To financial supporters.

Termination or retention? As I stated earlier, it depends.

- To the individual's family.
- To the general public.
- What legal implications apply?
 - Retaining an employee guilty of a criminal offense may carry significant legal risks.
 - Retaining an employee guilty of harming others may increase civil liabilities.
- What insurance consequences will apply?
 - Will liability insurance be dropped or premiums increased?
 - What do insurers require of their insureds in this type of situation?

But as you consider these issues, above all look to Scripture.

- How is forgiveness being demonstrated?
- What example is being taught by how the ministry responds to the situation?
- How are both consequences and mercy being applied?



Often supervisors have little knowledge in such matters, especially supervisory groups made of boards of committees. Even individual supervisors often lack experience or specialized training in unique situations that arise. Thus, it is wise to seek godly counsel:

Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety (Proverbs 11:14 ESV).

Seek Christian legal counsel to guide you on employment laws and other legal issues. Check with your insurance agent to learn about options. Ask for assistance from denominational leaders, who often have experience in such cases and ideas for professional help. Access professional counseling or medical advice when dealing with mental and physical health issues. Take advantage of specialized services for domestic violence or addiction consultation services.

In matters involving biblical reconciliation, invest in consultation and teaching services from a Christian reconciliation ministry. Such an organization provides experienced guidance, offers professional resources and teaching, and can refer you to other professionals. Trained reconcilers can guide you in examining the Scriptures while you weigh other issues and advice.

Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisors they succeed (Proverbs 15:22 ESV).

Leadership Training and Resources

Ambassadors of Reconciliation provides a wide array of training and resources to equip those who supervise ministry leaders. For example:

- *Built on the Rock: The Healthy Congregation* by Ted Kober (Concordia Publishing House, 2017). Learn how you can strengthen the spiritual health of your church. Build it on Christ, the Rock, the Living Word. Includes guidance for leaders and leadership boards. <https://www.aorhope.org/product-page/built-on-the-rock-the-healthy-congregations>
- *Built on the Rock Leader's Pack* (AoR, 2018). 25 years in the making, this comprehensive resource includes 400 pages of consultation and teaching material. Church leaders will be equipped through teaching on spiritual leadership as well as governance. Additional features include:
 - Sample constitution and bylaws
 - Sample policy manuals for elders, church council, and school board
 - Flash drive with reproducible contents of the teaching material and sample documents<https://www.aorhope.org/botr-leaders-pack>
- *Leadership Training and Consultation*. Based on extensive experience working with leaders of churches, schools, and other ministries, AoR has developed training to equip lay leaders and professional ministry workers to be more effective and productive in their vocations. Leaders learn proactive skills for avoiding destructive conflicts and reconciling relationships while addressing challenges. We provide standard and custom training and consultation in the following areas:
 - *Spiritual Lay Leadership Training and Consultation*: <https://www.aorhope.org/sllt>
 - *Structuring the Healthy Congregation Training and Consultation*: <https://www.aorhope.org/governance-seminar>
 - *Policy Governance for Boards of Directors Training and Consultation*: <https://www.aorhope.org/leadership-training>
- AoR also provides extensive resources and training to equip leaders in conflict coaching, mediation, and adjudication. <https://www.aorhope.org/practicums>

For more information, see www.aorhope.org
or call Ambassadors of Reconciliation at 406-698-6107.

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