

How To Know When To Trust Someone Again

by Alfred H. Ells

Leaders That Last Ministries

“Richard had sex with my girlfriend,” the young leader lamented. His girlfriend was one of the singles leaders and Richard was head of the ministry.

One of the most devastating trials a family or church may face is moral failure. When Biblical norms are violated through adultery, pornography and other moral infractions, the repercussions can be severe and long-lasting. Obviously, such transgressions require major repentance, healing and change.

But what do you do when the transgressor wants to be trusted again? What criteria should be used to determine if trust is warranted for a failed pastor or spouse? The first thing to realize is that the sin at hand did not develop overnight, but most likely built up over time. Therefore, it will take time—weeks, months, maybe years—to undo. The fallen leader, spouse or family member will need ample amounts of prayer, humility and counsel to overcome the problem and prove to be trustworthy again.

The following are key milestones that can indicate the person can be trusted again. It is important that we pay attention to outward actions and responses during the healing process which include:

1. Recognition and ownership is the needed first step. Richard had to fully admit to his problem with adultery and the unhealthy power sex has in his life. He needed to recognize what it has cost his life, his family, the young woman and the church. Full recognition and ownership is essential, or healing will not occur. The fallen person must not blame others. His problem is his problem. No one made him do it. He committed adultery because of his own mismanaged needs, not because of the seductive idolatry of the young woman or lack of attention from his spouse. Her ongoing flattery and attention was like a drug to him. She thought she was in love. In truth, she was re-enacting her own damaged past with her father by wanting Richard’s attention and affection. However, his unchecked needs caused him to violate his position of trust and cross forbidden boundaries. Emotional attraction and sexual temptation are common to both men and women. Being idolized is common in ministry. All leaders must learn how to avoid falling into this trap. Congregants too often put leaders on a pedestal—and the leader allows it to happen because of his own unmet needs and insecurities.

2. It is essential to follow a personal plan of recovery. Recovery and healing takes time; therefore, a plan for change is essential. The person must follow the plan because he wants to, not because he is forced to. Richard became convinced that the only way he was going to survive and thrive afterward was if he had a solid basis for continued support and change. Hence, his plan consisted of making amends, support group meetings, counseling, accountability with his best friend and an oversight team, as well as soliciting honest ongoing feedback from his wife.

3. Make sure the roots of the problem are uncovered and resolved. It is necessary to discover the empowering roots beneath the sin. Richard shared that he had struggled with sexual thoughts and temptation since viewing porn as a teenager. He had built a rich fantasy life as a result and on occasion continued his pattern of porn viewing and masturbation as an adult. He had never told anyone of his problem. He had successfully hidden it from his wife and others for years. Coming from a hurtful family background, Richard struggled with the lack of love and affection from his mother. His mom had serious emotional problems, had been hospitalized for depression and had not been able to give him the love and attention a growing child needs. His first exposure to porn was powerful and addictive. His

fantasy life quickly became his way of connecting with the need for female nurture. Porn imprinted him in all the wrong ways. It damaged his view of sex and women. Healing these roots required re-visiting the past through prayer and discussion. One necessary indicator of a fallen person's healing is his ability to fully describe the roots of his dysfunctional and sinful behavior and what he did to resolve them. It took time, but Richard was able to do so.

4. There should be a willingness to make amends. Recovery demands full responsibility. Making amends to those we have hurt indicates a willingness to accept responsibility for our actions. The anonymous programs of recovery have a step that requires listing all those to whom amends should be made and for what reason. The next step requires making amends, except where doing so would hurt another. Richard made his list and included a special section on ways in which he had violated his wife by pressuring her to be like the women he viewed in the porn videos. "His constant pressure and criticism hurt almost as much as the adultery," she shared. He also sent a letter of apology to the church eldership. It was read to the congregation.

Trust restored

I received a call from Richard asking if I felt comfortable being a reference for him. He was applying for the pastorate of a medium sized church in the Midwest. His accountability team had given him the go ahead and now he wanted my endorsement. This is the way it should work – others who know the failed person declaring him ready to be trusted again. I asked him about his life and recovery plan—was he still following his plan and had he made his amends? "I've followed through with the plan we created, and it's worked. I feel more whole and free of obsessive sexual thoughts than at any time in my life," he shared. "Stacey and I are doing very well and so are my adult children. The move to Georgia to be near her family has proven to be the right decision. I've been working in her father's insurance business, but have recently felt a growing passion for ministry. It's been almost two years and Stacey thinks it's time for me to engage again. What do you think?" I was willing to offer a good recommendation. Richard had done, and was continuing to do, the hard work of recovery. I considered him "safe" to be trusted again.

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