

# Pastoral Theology Brief: Cohabitation, Repentance And The Fruits Of Repentance

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An evangelical ministry is a blessed privilege. Yet every pastor knows that pastoral care also has its challenges. It is an understatement to say that one of the most trying tasks an evangelical pastor faces in the 21st century is to confront the cohabitation epidemic—couples living together without marriage.

One struggle that pastors often mention is the challenge of applying brotherly admonition to cohabitating couples. Consider the following situation: A couple meets with the pastor and indicates that they wish to be married. In the course of the discussion it becomes apparent that they are already cohabitating. How should the pastor handle this situation? Should he run the risk of ruffling some feathers, especially if the woman comes from a prominent family in the congregation? Won't the situation resolve itself when they are married in eight months? Besides, they know that what they are doing is wrong. That is why they are getting married.

First we have to remember that our main goal in this situation is to address their relationship with their God. Our goal is to lead them to repentance. They need to see that their sin of cohabitation/premarital sex is an affront to God. It violates his laws regarding the gifts of sex and marriage. As sin it also threatens the welfare of their souls. Their sin does what Scripture says it does—it separates them from their God (Isaiah 59:2). It earns them the wages of eternal death (Romans 6:23). It prepares a place for them in the prison prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41). It hands them over to the eternal Judge, and it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31), who can destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28). Resolving their living situation is secondary—that involves the fruit of repentance. To convince them that they need to live apart or get married without convicting them of their sin is moralizing. It sees outward moral behavior rather than inner renewal as the goal.

As pastors we need to keep the couple focused on how their sin affects their relationship with their God. It will be tempting to jump ahead to the fruit of repentance. We may convince the couple to move up the wedding date. We may be tempted to think that since they are getting married in several months the situation will resolve itself. Yet in the process we may very well bypass the most important step—leading the couple to repentance. Confessing sin is where repentance begins. That is also where appropriate fruit of repentance begins.

Scripture presents the concept of repentance as a "turning." Both the word **שׁוּב** in the Hebrew<sup>1</sup> and the (*ἐπι/ἀπο*) *στρεφω* in the Greek<sup>2</sup> convey this concept. These words are used to denote a turning away from sin (*terminus a quo*) and a turning in faith to Christ (*terminus ad quem*). Both of these are "actions that take place in the penitent heart of the sinner.

Even though we cannot look into the heart to determine if repentance is genuine, we can see evidence of these (*terminus a quo/ terminus ad quem*) in the Christian life. When one or the other is lacking, we have to doubt whether the sinner has repented of his or her sin.

This is where fruit of repentance comes into play. Fruit of repentance does not make repentance genuine. But presence or absence of fruit of repentance may demonstrate whether repentance is genuine. If the sinner claims to repent but continues in the sin, one can only conclude that the turning away from sin has not occurred. For "fruit of repentance is to desist from the sin for which one repents."<sup>3</sup> As Jesus states in Matthew 7:17, "A good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them." Even though Jesus applies these words to false prophets, the same principle applies to people in general. Outward acts give evidence of an inward condition. Later in the same gospel, Jesus adds, "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good. Or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit" (Matthew 12:33).

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 7:3; 1 Kings 8:35; Jeremiah 31:18

<sup>2</sup> Acts 3:26; James 5:19,20

<sup>3</sup> Armin Schuetze, "Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage," *WLQ*, Vol. 79:4 (Fall, 1982), p 257.

We also think of the apostle's words in 1 John 3:9 and 5:18 where he says, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin." In both cases John uses the durative present to stress the on-going nature of the activity. John is not saying that a Christian will never sin. He is saying that continuing on in a sinful lifestyle—living in a sin—is incompatible with a Christian lifestyle.

When a couple admits to the sin of cohabitation but then continues in that same sin, we would have reason to doubt whether the couple is penitent. They have not turned away from their sin. Even though they indicate a desire to change their sinful lifestyle in the future, their situation remains unchanged in the present. If we as pastors give our blessing to such an arrangement, we are in essence saying that not all premarital sex is sinful. We are saying that if two people are committed to each other and plan to get married in the future, they may sleep with each other and that such an action is acceptable to God. This demonstrates that the couple has not yet been led to see their sin as an offense to God and a threat to the welfare of their souls. Nor have they been comforted by the gospel and motivated by the same to change their sinful lifestyle.

Repentance by its very nature involves a turning away from sin. This turning away from sin involves the proper attitude in the heart, which recognizes that this sin is an affront to God and earns eternal death. Repentance also leads to a proper action in life—turning away from the sin for which one repents. As Jesus told the woman caught in the sin of adultery, "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11).

When the sinner repents, he turns away from his sin at the present time, not at some future date. He does not say, "I will change my sinful lifestyle and show the fruit of repentance in six months, or eight months, or in a year." Just as the fruit of repentance fits the sin, so it begins to grow when the person repents. It may not always be the perfect fruit we would like. Even penitent Christians still have a sinful nature and may continue to struggle against the sin of which they have repented. But to claim that we have turned away from sin (*terminus a quo*) while clinging to the very sin we are repenting of is to deny that we are penitent. In the case of cohabitating couples the sin that they need to "turn away from" is not just cohabitation. It is the sin of premarital sex which may continue even if they live apart.

But we might ask, "Won't such an approach drive people away from the church. By bearing with these sinners in their weakness for six or eight months, won't we eventually save them for the kingdom?" Here it is helpful to distinguish between giving offense and taking offense. Scripture warns us about offending a weak brother. In such a case our thoughtless or careless actions may cause a person to fall into sin or may drive a person away from the faith. However, Scripture indicates that there is a difference between a weak brother (Romans 14) and a sinning brother (Matthew 18). It also indicates that when we apply brotherly admonition and proclaim the truth of God's Word, some will take offense. But in such a case we are not driving a weak brother or sister away from the faith. We are seeking to draw a sinning brother or sister back to the faith from which they have strayed. This brotherly admonition will not only address the cohabitation but also the sinful sexual relationship of the couple.

The temptations a pastor faces to accept inadequate fruits of repentance are great. And the arguments we use to justify them sound convincing: We don't want to drive couples away from the church. We don't want to create tensions within the body of Christ. We want to avoid the legalism we are so often warned against. We want to let the gospel predominate in our ministry. Certainly these are important points for the pastor to consider as he ministers to cohabitating couples. But they are misapplied when we use them to justify a lack of Christian admonition or to accept inadequate fruit of repentance. Christian admonition does not drive people away from the church. It seeks to save them for the kingdom. To use God's law as a mirror is not legalism. It is a necessary part of an evangelical ministry. Confronting sin does not destroy oneness in the body of Christ. It leads to greater unity.

To lead cohabitating couples to appropriate fruit of repentance is not programming sanctification. John the Baptist suggested specific fruits to the people he served (Luke 3:10-14). Just as the "one who is stealing must steal no longer" (Ephesians 4:28), so also the ones who are living and sleeping together outside of marriage must do so no longer. They accomplish this by living and sleeping apart until the wedding or getting married. We cannot turn away from the sin and embrace it at the same time.

We serve neither the Good Shepherd nor the sheep entrusted into our care when we fail to lead those

caught in a sin to repent of that sin and to show appropriate fruit of repentance. To allow people to continue on in their sin with the promise that at a future date the outward offense of their sin will be removed is not leading them to repentance. And to apply the Christian admonition of God's law to cohabitating couples is not driving them away from the church. It is conducting an evangelical ministry. Such a ministry may not make us popular with the unbelieving world and those who are influenced by it. But such a ministry does show a faithfulness to the Savior we serve and a love for souls.