



The Road to Infidelities

BLIND SPOTS AND DENIALS GET CHRISTIANS IN TROUBLE

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I don't think I've met one couple whose marriage ceremony I've performed that have given thought to their marriage including attractions to other individuals. So when this question is asked in premarital counseling, something like, "*Have you talked about if one of you becomes attracted to another person?*" the perplexity—sometimes a crude snark at how potentially *negative* this question is—is a signal that *no*, most don't think about ever having to have *that* conversation.

Sue Bartho, writing for *Eternity News*, calls this a **blind-spot**.¹ *Indeed*.

In premarital counseling, I push couples to deal with some of the tough stuff: conflict and resolutions, budgets, how to communicate, expectations of one another, even growing old and health concerns. But when a question of one partner becoming *wayward*—in "feelings or deed"—comes up, it's obvious they haven't gone there. *Most really don't want to go there*. They prefer instead to believe the "*happy ever after*," rather than the "*ever after, happy*" could happen.

¹ Bartho, Sue. "Infidelity: the Thing Christians Never Expect," *Eternity News* (May) 2020. www.eternitynews.com.au

It happens. . .

And there are many reasons, and roads, to it happening. Recently, the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* published statistics that we probably don't want to hear: About 65 percent of men and 55 percent of women will have extramarital affairs by the time they are 40.²

What is more startling are stats on adultery and divorce from the most conservative Christian group, *evangelicals*, whose numbers now seem equal to the general population's numbers.³ In other words, Christianity as a faith, even among the most conservative, is *no guarantee* that there would be less chances of an affair—a statement we will try to get an answer for later in this piece.

Other Attractions. . . "they happen."

Let's start at the beginning. "*Chemistry between two human beings happens. It just happens*" says Bartho.⁴ And, indeed, there's neurochemical truth in that.

Here's a little more: Humans are wired to form connections with other human beings. Be it by how hormones and aliphatic acids act and attract, how dopamine does its joy work; or how a voice pitch has been coded or a personality just seems to "jive" with another, humans respond to, and form attachments to others.

These "connections" with other human beings run the gamut of social-emotional bonding, because we are all driven to the interpersonal. No person is an island.

Here's the BUT. . .

But, we humans get into problems unless we are **mindful** and **clear** of how these attractions not only happen, but why they may satisfy beyond those we've already formed in a marriage.

Everyone's heard of the "*seven-year itch*," the time in a marriage when the shine and luster of marital perfection has definitely worn off. It is true that most "deviations" of the type we are going to call "emotional affairs," or the other kind, "physical affairs," usually happen a few years into marriage.

However, it would be incorrect to assume that "deviations" only happen then. They can happen any time that a person isn't in tune with their needs, their spiritual self, and especially their partner. We become open to relational connections that offer what we presume we need, is missing, or in other ways is more gratifying, truthful, or "better" than what exists.

² Carter, Zackery A. "Facebook Cyberinfidelity and the Online Disinhibition Effect: Unconscious Marital Detachment and Extramarital Attachment." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* (Spring 2019), 38:1, 47–56..

³ Carder and Jaenick, *Torn Asunder: Recovering from Extramarital Affairs*, Moody, 2008.

⁴ Bartho, *Infidelity*, 2020.

Waywardness happens when we've turned a deaf ear and blind eye to our own and our partner's relational needs. It may "just happen;" but when I've drilled down into marriages in trouble, most often there's been a lynch-pin hiding somewhere in there.

The sequence. . .Is there a *sequence*?

Most individuals don't fly head-first into an emotional or physical affair. These form gradually, and often taken on dimensions that the person can easily "justify," or lie to themselves about, e.g., "it's just friendship," or "they're a work partner," or even, "he's the pastor." But they do all have elements in common: All seem to bring to the relational table something that individuals can't seem to be getting from their marital relationship, sometimes even other relationships.

Most often, it's the type of understanding and what I call "soft acceptances," that seem to be missing in a marriage of years; where there are gaps in acceptance; where couples irritate each other; where there are communication faux pas more regularly than not; when one may be more assertive than the other; and where sex itself may have become bland or unsatisfying.

Let's note, this is an open door for evil to further engage havoc in one's feelings (1 Peter 5:8; 2 Cor 2:11). Some have stated they start to think about whether they "*married the wrong person*," that the present situations are "*not fixable*;" or worse, "*that the love one had for the other is diminished, or even gone*." Daydreams of life with another being "different" may enter the picture. The person becomes *self-pitying*, which opens the door for all sorts of *rationalizations* and even *justifications*, since now the *self seems wounded* and in need of salve. This mixture can become deadly, both for the self and for the marriage.

Emotional affairs.

An *emotional affair* happens when a married person seeks, and then shares, emotional intimacy with someone who is not their spouse. In an *emotional affair* there is no physical sexual intimacy per se, although assuredly, it can be insinuated.

Now let's be clear here, there are all sorts of circumstances and relationships where sharing emotional intimacies are appropriate, so long as they do not overshadow—or in the case we state—in some way replace the emotional intimacy of marriage.

Women often have friends who are emotionally close to them, with whom they can share intimacies, and often be rewarded with returned empathies. But these, hopefully, do not replace the intimacy such women keep and maintain in their marriages. Likewise, men (less than women) may find a friend who becomes an intimate guy—with whom he's comfortable sharing emotions and some intimacies. We've nicked-named these "*bromances*," since men, like women, do form strong emotional alliance from time to time.

All's fair here, so long as the emotion-seeking, intimacy-sharing, doesn't come to be codependent, or usurp the intimacy one should seek and have with their marital partner.

An *emotional affair* by a married person with an opposite sex person becomes such when a “just friend,” “work partner,” or “counselor,” becomes your codependent: You seek ongoing emotional intimacy, and disavow the cost and damage to your marital life and relationship .by doing so. *Men and women miss the alarms going off when these relationships cross the lines.*

And what lines are these?

- *When the desire to spend time with the other person equals or surpasses the desire to be with one’s spouse*
- *When emails, texts, etc., become ‘secretive’ and are deleted – not necessarily because of their content as much as their frequency and lengths*
- *When the content of the communications—be it verbal and in person, or textual—would make the spouse react negatively and question the nature of the relationship*
- *When the satisfaction that these interactions bring seem to fulfill what isn’t available in the marital relationship.*

Christians involved in an *emotional affair* seem to also miss the larger questions—***Does this relationship inspire you to obey Christ or move away from him? Does it move you closer to your spouse, or away from them? And, Does it focus you on one person more than those you already have?*** Emotional affairs are known to wreak a lot of havoc in the long run, particularly when emotions become powerful influences on individual lives, and create a fantasy world for many that eventually comes crashing down.

There’s no doubt that God wants us all to have rich and rewarding relationships with sundry peoples, whether you are single or married. But the boundaries we hold need to be healthy for all, and not engage us in hijacking reality or stealing joy and intimacy from a spouse.

The “other type” of affair.

Of course, this other type involves physical intimacies. This type starts as an emotional affair and isn’t curtailed, but eventually grows into a faux love-type relationship, again, because there is a deficit in a marriage that has gone unresolved. (If a single person is involved here with a married one, these may *also* have deficits that have gone unchecked.) Of course, there could be other reasons for physical affairs; but a majority of the time, emotional and physical infidelity is the result of individuals not working on keeping what they have, improving it, perfecting it together; or for themselves if single.

Marriage is a covenant. An affair breaks it. There is betrayal and feelings of not being worthy. Men and women alike suffer these—don’t think for a minute that a man whose wife has an affair with another man isn’t equally wounded, or feeling violated.

If *she has an affair with another woman* (today, more common than one thinks), the male may be even more injured and overwhelmed in trying to understand the same-sex attraction. Likewise, if *he has an affair with another man* (again, now more common than

presumed), the female spouse will question the entire marriage relationship and assume same-sex attraction has always been there, even if that is not the case.⁵

These affairs aren't inevitable in the modern world. But research has shown that women's statistics on infidelity are quickly catching up with men's.⁶ We also know that children who come from homes that have been disrupted by affairs and divorces are more prone to having affairs themselves.⁷ Adding to the bad news is the Internet, for we know how online affairs have become extremely prevalent—some claiming it is the biggest threat to marital stability today.⁸

All that said, physical intimacies in affairs bring on a completely different level of emotions and conditions to deal with: The idea that an intimate partner under a covenantal agreement has "*become one flesh*" with another may render itself as a horrific, often "impassable" barrier to overcome. "How can I forgive that?" And, "How can I let him/her touch me again?!"

One has to forgive a spouse before being able to be intimate again. Assuming forgiveness is possible for a moment (we'll touch on that in a bit!), re-building sexual intimacy isn't going to be easy—for anyone. Mere "touch" now raises different feelings. . .

I'll leave it at that for now, and just underscore that while it is not impossible to rebuild a marriage after an affair, it's going to take doubling down on forgiveness, hard, hard work, a skilled counselor, and lots of brutal conversations.

Be-waring. . .and the "renewal of the mind."

Being a Christian does not lessen the chances of having an affair.⁹

That may be a true statement, but I'd like to rephrase it: *Having the mind of Christ will lessen the possibility of a Christian having an affair.* Let the difference sink in, because we are about to go for a ride here.

Our salvation comes not only from belief in the One that rendered the ultimate sacrifice, but also rests on the salvific and continuing work of the Holy Spirit, which engenders in the Christian its fruits. The command Jesus gives, "*Come and follow me*" (Matt 4:19; 16:24) is prefaced or followed by negations and admonitions—"sell all you have," "leave your mother and father," "let the dead bury the dead," "take up your cross," and ultimately, "deny yourself."

⁵ Both men and women can experience "erotic plasticity," meaning, developing feelings and same-sex attraction for sundry reasons we can't get into here, despite their seeing themselves as heterosexual, or displacing labels for the sake of feelings. These types of same-sex affairs wreak more havoc and have longer lasting effects/issues because married people are heterosexually oriented and thus this is a "double blow."

⁶ Zur, Offer. "Infidelity & Affairs: Facts, Myths, and What Works." *Zur Institute Online Continuing Education for Mental Health Professionals*. <https://www.zurinstitute.com/infidelity/>. Retrieved September 23, 2021.

⁷ Carder and Jaenick, 2008.

⁸ Maheu, M., R. Subotnik, and B. Rona. *Infidelity on the Internet: Virtual Relationships and Real Betrayal*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2001.

⁹ Crosby, C. "Why Affairs Happen." *Today's Christian Woman*. September 30, 2008.

It is a call to a *cognitive recalibration*, a thinking-different-because-*I'm-now different* kind of process; a process that eventually replaces *our will, our mind*, with *the mind of Christ*.

You want to keep from wanderlusting?

You want your marriage and relationship to flourish despite time and circumstances?

You want to rid the self from those nasties that keep you hungry for other's attention?

For being the center of the universe?

Put on the mind of Christ.

No, it's not like changing baseball caps. It's not just, *OK, Vince, I'm now thinking Christ and thinking Christianly*. It's a surrender of will, a daily—*daily*—invitation for Christ to enter into the mud of this world with you; to “walk in the mud with me;”¹⁰ to ditch the cable network of “things of this world” that derail me from putting my attention on *Your will*, and *my obedience*.

Miroslav Volf, a name you may not have probably heard (theologian and social activist from the Balkans) writes (paraphrased here):

*Decentering means making Christ the Center. It does not mean obliterating your self-concept; it means 'moving you over' so that Christ can have his will in your life. It's a daily commitment to remember Who is the author and finisher of your faith; Who should be your guiding light; Whose still small voice you should be heeding.*¹¹

Doing so means pushing aside (and *you do that, not God*) all that hinders that early morning or erstwhile communication that invites God to be the Center.

Slowly, but assuredly, the *mind of Christ* builds in the place of your “old mind,” the one that places your ego above that of your spouse's; that intones *you have permission to look*, even if you don't touch; that presumes the grass is always greener elsewhere.

These human tendencies need to be *crucified* (the strongest word Apostle Paul uses to insure we get the message, Gal 2:20). There can be but One mind, One leading us into salvation and keeping us from stumbling.

If you willfully allow the Holy Spirit to develop in you the mind of Christ, **do you think you'll be equally prone as the population mean to wanderlust?** (Check out Phil 4:8)

Will you early on ***catch the signals that warn you?*** (You'll hear that 'still small voice' that says, “this way, not that,” Isa 30:21).

Will your heart be **more easily convicted** if you do go astray? (Check John 16:8)

¹⁰ Schaeffer, Francis, *True Spirituality*. 2001.

¹¹ Volf, M. *Exclusion and Embrace*. Abingdon Press Revised Edition, 2019.

The renewal of our mind is an essential component of our maintenance as a Christian. It is key to keeping us centered on the One that we can trust to bring us home. More to our earth-dwelling, He enables us to *decenter*, so we can become that *servant* to our spouses, that *willing other* who keeps the sworn allegiances, “*in sickness and health, wealth or poverty, till death parts us from each other.*”

Forgiving. Moving on.

I’ve saved the hardest concern for the last. So let’s start with some “better news”: Some extramarital affairs *can* be survived. Studies even say marriages who do survive, can grow stronger after the affair— by facing it, making truthful, agonizing apologies, working through the tough areas, and ultimately, forgiving.¹²

It’s hard to acknowledge adultery, and even harder to recognize adultery as a sin. Proverbs wants adulterers to be *chagrined*, calling those who do “*lacking sense,*” and being “*self-destructive*” (Prov 6:32).

Now depending on how “biblical” one wants to be in the interpretation of 1 Cor 7, there is obvious room for dissolution of a marriage when there has been unfaithfulness on the part of one member. “Let him go.” (“Let *her* go.”) “God,” the verse says, “has called you to peace. (7:15). You are not enslaved to a relationship that someone else has shattered.

1 Corinthians also teaches that if there is room to reconcile, one should try for that if possible (7:10-11). For any such to happen, **humbling repentance** on the part of the offender has to be part of the equation—and that’s never facile or linear. Even then, not every marriage is salvageable after an affair.

What does forgiveness look like in this territory?

It certainly doesn’t infer *forgetting*, or forging on with a spouse who waffles. Forgiveness is a two-way street here. If there is repentance by the wayward spouse; if there is an understanding that sometimes good people do *stupid things*—or worse—because of their ego or what-not, Christ’s voice seems to have gotten lost in the din. . . AND if there is a heart that is broken but still has a history of pumping love, there may be room for forgiving another’s transgression.

In these instances, forgiveness rides on authentic repentance on the part of the other, and it can only come from a heart that has once truly loved faithfully.

Personally, I always recommend couples retain a **tested therapist** who has worked with couples in distress, to facilitate any way forward. A way forward ought never be thought of as an either-or decision: “I either divorce or not;” “I forgive but don’t you come back!” How

¹² Scheinkman, M. “Beyond the Trauma of Betrayal: Reconsideration Affairs in Couple Therapy.” *Family Process*. 44, (2005) 227-244

to move on depends a lot on how both individuals process the hurt, pain, and anguish of a broken promise, a broken lives experience.

The idea of reconciliation will most often seem unachievable if not untenable. But I've worked with couples that have moved beyond the pain and hurt, reconnected, forgiven, and forged a new alliance. **It takes a lot.** It takes guts, and it takes perseverance to try and do good for each individual, and of course if there is family, that as well.

People always ask, "How long does it take?" — and the answer is always "It depends on the couple." If you want statistics, the average time it takes couples to regain some level of comfort and trust, and engage in life together is about **two years**.

Whatever happens, injuries need healing, and anger and vitriol only keep an infection and pain going. **God would love us to forgive and in the process, start to heal.** Again, that doesn't mean reconciling or forging a new alliance, necessarily. It does mean the aggrieved individual has reached a milestone of their own, in letting go, in acknowledging the fallenness and humanity in us all, and achieved a moment of release.

The Take Aways

We can debate a lot here, but the message is really simple: Unless you cultivate the mind of Christ; unless you enable yourself to draw that big, black line at the first instance of any overdone attraction; unless you see connections for what they really are, you are playing with the proverbial fire that eventually can burn you, and your house down.

Expect that there will be moments of natural chemistry and attraction. Expect also, to honor the commitment you've made to your significant other—heart, soul, emotional and sexual intimacy included. Give your mind over to Jesus Christ; let His Spirit teach you to *think like Christ*, to set your ego free from the front and center, and pray you hear his small, still voice telling you "this is the way NOT to go!"

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