

# Why Unrepentance Is Cause for Dismissal

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This article is from the series “Supervision Issues in Christian Ministry.”<sup>1</sup>



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“I did nothing wrong!”

How often have I heard this claim from a key staff person in Christian ministry! This defense is often declared during mediation where a professional ministry worker<sup>2</sup> has either been released from his/her position or is in danger of being terminated.

Of course, a history of events leads up to such a serious dispute. Usually it begins with misunderstandings between employee and supervisor. In churches, educational institutions, and other ministries, the supervisor may be a board or committee, whose members

have differing understandings or opinions. They may disagree on how to address performance inadequacies. Working with a supervisory group tends to complicate employment disputes.

Both worker and supervisor begin their relationship with separate expectations. If the ministry lacks written documentation of expectations (job descriptions, policy manuals, call documents, employment agreements, etc.), differences are likely to be more pronounced. Failing to provide regular employee evaluations or to correct minor infractions as they occur worsens the situation. Poor management practices contribute to employment failures.

But even with good management, addressing unmet expectations of the worker may escalate into significant conflict. Unless behavior changes, the relationship heads toward separation.

Employment issues resulting in termination vary. But unrepentance is often common to such disputes. *I did nothing wrong* becomes the defensive cry of the worker whose continued position is in jeopardy. The individual under scrutiny claims he was judged unjustly and has the right to continue working. In some cases, the worker responds

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

with charges against the employer for irrational prejudice, blatant discrimination, or deficient management.

Whether management identifies other valid reasons for termination, unrepentance in itself is a cause for termination in Christian ministry. Unrepentance that rises to the cause for termination is more than disagreement over minor transgressions. It is a persistent self-justification in spite of a proven major moral failing or documented offenses that have been addressed more than a couple of times.

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A pastor appealed a decision for his defrocking to an appellate panel. In the hearing, twenty of his members and former members testified against him. His church had split twice in the four years he had served them. Responding to questions from the panel, the pastor exclaimed, "Look! I know I am a sinner. But I have done nothing wrong!" The panel ruled against him largely because of his declaration of self-justification and his refusal to acknowledge any wrong-doing. A man who cannot confess his sin is disqualified to serve as pastor. How can he preach repentance and the forgiveness of sin? (See 1 Timothy 4:12 and 16.)

Christian supervisors often neglect to think biblically about the implication of unrepentance. Three reasons to consider why unrepentance is cause for dismissal:

- Unrepentance is statement of unbelief.
- Unrepentance means that the worker doesn't understand what he did wrong, and therefore the supervisor can expect the employee to repeat the offensive behavior.
- Unrepentance serves as an unchristian example for others to follow.

Look! I know I am a sinner. But I have done nothing wrong!

Persistent unrepentance characterizes living an ungodly life, which is often identified as a reason for dismissing a ministry worker in official employee policies. For example, consider how unrepentance fails to exhibit biblical characteristics of a pastor described in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 – *above reproach, respectable, able to teach, not conceited, and well thought of by outsiders.*<sup>3</sup>

## Unrepentance and Unbelief

Repentance includes two components:

- First is contrition, that is, godly sorrow for sin.
- Second is faith in the forgiveness of sins, won for us through Christ.

In unrepentance that reveals persistent self-justification (described above), the sinner is not sorry for his sin and thereby demonstrates lack of faith in God's forgiveness.

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<sup>3</sup> Although this article pertains to supervisors and those under their authority, co-workers also have biblical responsibility in dealing with an unrepentant colleague. Review Bible studies from <https://www.aorhope.org/bible-studies> or the on-line course *Conflict Resolution vs. Reconciliation* (<https://www.aorhope.org/aor-gift>).

When we refuse to confess our sin, we deny our need for a Savior. Our self-justification attempts to substitute for Christ's atonement. The Bible teaches:

*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.... If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (1 John 1:8, 10 ESV).*

In denying sin, we don't deceive God. We don't fool others, including co-workers, those under our care, those who supervise us, and even our own family members. There is only one who is deceived when I deny sin – me.

But the most dreadful part of this verse comes in the words, “and the truth is not in us.”

Remember that the author of this First Epistle of John is also the writer of the Gospel of John, where he defines *the truth* in Jesus' own words:

*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6, ESV, emphasis added).*

Note the impact of replacing the words *the truth* in 1 John 1:8 with the name *Jesus*:

*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and [Jesus] is not in us.*

When we deny our sin, we deny our need for Christ. If one hasn't sinned, he doesn't need a Savior. He trusts in his own righteousness.

Likewise, John identifies *the Word* as *Jesus* in the first chapter of his Gospel:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (1 John 1:1, 14a ESV, emphasis added).*

Similarly, replace *the word* in 1 John 1:10 with *Jesus*:

*If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and [Jesus] is not in us.*

When someone declares, “I have done nothing wrong,” he is denying Christ and calling God a liar. That person's love and trust are in himself above all. This defines self-justification and self-righteousness. Such expression is idolatry, a sin against the First Commandment, “You shall have no other gods.”

While a ministry staff member may have not violated other written policies or intended to do anything wrong, the statement “I did nothing wrong” is a statement of unbelief. A “perfect person” doesn't need Christ.

Dr. Martin Luther said, “The more you minimize sin, the more will grace decline in value.”<sup>4</sup> When someone claims to have done nothing wrong, he not only minimizes his own sin; but he also reduces the size of his Savior.

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<sup>4</sup> *Luther's Works*, Volume 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 142.

Unrepentance revealed in persistent self-righteousness disqualifies a person from service in Christian ministry because it is a statement of unbelief.

## Unrepentant? Expect a Repeat!

When a person declares he has done nothing wrong, he communicates that he doesn't recognize anything that needs changing. The supervisor essentially is given notice that the worker will repeat this behavior. Thus, if the supervisor is concerned about a specific attitude or action that is harmful to the ministry, that supervisor can anticipate that the worker will repeat the offense.

Consider a middle school teacher who is accused of touching students in an inappropriate manner. When comforting an upset student, male or female, he has a practice of massaging the student's back. A couple of parents report that according to their children, his hands would slip around to the front edges of the child. When confronted about this behavior, he defends himself. He points out that his actions have no sexual intent whatsoever. He explains that when someone gives him a back massage, he finds it soothing. As evidence that he is innocent, he notes that this has been his regular practice for years, and no one has complained until these two students. They obviously read more into it than intended, and the parents are unreasonably protective. Thus, he asserts, "I did nothing wrong."

What can the principal and school board expect in the future? Will this teacher change his habits? Not likely. Just because past students and parents have not filed formal complaints does not justify the danger of a teacher touching a student in this way. If the administration fails to remove the teacher, the unacceptable behavior will continue. Not only may other students be harmed, but the school may be sued for not taking action when the administration learned about the teacher's habits.

Thus, the lack of repentance becomes a new liability for administration. The teacher represents a legal risk (not to mention potential harm to other students!). He must be terminated for his unrepentance because the unacceptable behavior will continue.

## Modeling Unrepentance

The pastor, teacher, principal, or other ministry leader teaches by example. If the teacher models self-justification, those under her influence learn how to self-justify. The example of sinful pride replaces the lifestyle of repentance.

When a ministry worker denies any responsibility for a problem identified by a supervisor, that individual models the opposite of Christian humility. Instead of confessing his sin, he justifies. Not only is pride sinful, but it results in two consequences:

- A prideful leader is unapproachable. Those under his authority learn that this individual denies personal responsibility. When a leader asserts, "I did nothing wrong," he insinuates, "I'm always right." Thus, those under his leadership avoid being honest about their own failings or raising appropriate concerns about his actions.
- Others learn by his example of self-justification.

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The vocation of teacher (given to parents, grandparents, pastors, principals, head elder, manager, etc.) comes with a higher expectation of living the faith. James warns:

*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness (James 3:1 ESV).*

At first, as a long-time leader in multiple ministry settings, I thought it unfair that I should be held to a higher accountability than others. I resented when people brought complaints against me that I considered petty. But over time I began to realize that my example as a ministry leader influenced others more than I considered. My attitudes, my words, and my body language impacted others much more than I appreciated. Because of their respect for me and my position, they gave my actions more weight than their peers.

As a parent, I was sometimes pleased and at other times horrified when I overheard my son use my words with someone else. He was a live recording device, although not always accurate. What he repeated from me did not always reflect my intent or what I thought I was communicating. But it did reveal how he interpreted what I was thinking and doing. How careless I have been when serving as a father, a manager, or a president! I began to appreciate that as a teacher, I was given authority *with responsibility*. I needed to be held to a higher accountability.

A refusal to admit any wrong-doing does not demonstrate trust in Christ and his atoning work on the cross. Instead, self-justification reveals trust in one's own self, his own righteousness, his own holiness, his own perfection, his own personal pride. Whether one exhibits repentance or self-justification, both teach by example. A person is disqualified from working in a Christian ministry when he models unrepentance.

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## What if I Haven't Done Anything Wrong?

Theoretically, that is possible. After all, the Scriptures tell us that the followers of Jesus will be unjustly treated, and false accusations will be levied against us.

Yet, we must be careful when justifying ourselves. Scripture reminds us, "None is righteous. No, not one" (Romans 3:9). And, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it" (James 2:10). Is it really possible for someone to have done *nothing* wrong?

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Nevertheless, sometimes management gets it wrong. Those who report the offenses are not always truthful. Others simply misunderstand the person's actions and interpret them in the worst possible way. How should the Christian worker handle false accusations?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> There is a place for defending oneself against false accusations. But the defense must be godly, including remaining open to the possibility that there may be an element of truth in the charge. Note that Christian leaders are admonished to protect their workers from false and frivolous accusations, but they are also responsible to rebuke those who persist in sin (see 1 Timothy 5:19-20).

There is One who truly was sinless. He is the only One who can truthfully say, “I have done nothing wrong.” Nonetheless, He suffered and died unjustly! The Apostle Peter says this about such injustice:

*For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. 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 2:21-24 ESV).*

In a case where a ministry staff person felt he was falsely accused of demeaning others when admonishing others, he used the defense, “I did nothing wrong!” He repeatedly justified himself and would not listen to the concerns raised by the supervisor or co-workers. He claimed he was terminated without any valid cause, and management had discriminated against him.

As the mediator, I believed that the individual genuinely believed his words to others were not demeaning. I also believed that his intent was godly in correcting others. But I did not witness the acts in question. And, I heard two opposing views in mediation. Whom should I believe?

However, the accused employee was unwilling even to consider that his words or body language could be interpreted by someone as demeaning. Although he didn’t say these words *per se*, this is the message I received as a mediator:

- “I have done nothing wrong and therefore do not need Christ’s or anyone’s forgiveness.”
- “I don’t agree that anything I say or do when correcting others is wrong. Therefore, you can expect me to keep on doing what some find offensive.”
- “I exemplify standing up for myself. Others can learn from my prideful stance.”

Whether or not the staff member was guilty of the original charges, his supervisor and I heard first-hand his clear testimony of unrepentance. The employer determined that his unrepentance was sufficient cause for termination.

## **Hope in Repentance**

In contrast to unrepentance, a repentant staff member demonstrates faith in Jesus. His hope is not in his own rightness or good intent. His hope is in the Christ whose blood cleanses us from all sin. John reminds us:

*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).*

Proverbs also teaches:

*Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy (Proverbs 28:13 ESV).*

Why would a ministry supervisor retain someone who admitted his fault and confessed his

sin? I can think of three compelling reasons:

- Repentance *is* a statement of faith. The employee demonstrates full dependence upon God and His promises, no matter what the earthly consequences of admitting his fault.
- Repentance means I understand what I did was wrong, and with God's help I promise to change my behavior. Thus, the supervisor is comforted that positive change is possible with the humility reflected in confession.
- Repentance exemplifies the life of a faithful believer. Those under his authority can trust a leader who admits his own faults. And those who observe genuine humility learn how to live life under the cross.

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Even with repentance, some sins result in serious consequences, including losing one's position in a ministry. But in repentance there is hope in the peace that transcends understanding (Philippians 4:7). Even if the position is lost, the repentant soul confesses his faith and entrusts his future to the One who promises to be with him always.

For many offenses, however, the ministry leader who confesses retains his position.

I had an employee whose actions could have resulted in his dismissal. His actions hurt others including me, and his negative witness marred our ministry's reputation. I confronted his sinful behavior, and immediately he was contrite. Instead of justifying what he had done, he confessed to me and to others affected. He expected to be fired for his offense. His repentance included telling me what he had learned from this situation. The message I received was that he understood the gravity of his sin and was genuinely sorry. I reminded him that God forgave him: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1 ESV). I then forgave him as God forgave me (see Ephesians 4:32).

Forgiveness takes away the most serious consequence of all – eternal separation from God. But there may be earthly consequences. (Note God's forgiveness and yet earthly consequences for Moses in Deuteronomy 32:48-52 and for David in 2 Samuel 12:1-13).

Although I had cause to terminate him as his supervisor, I retained him. Why? His confession of sin was a confession of his faith in God's promise:

*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).*

His sin by itself did not disqualify him from continued service in ministry (some sins do



disqualify for continued service in ministry). His contrition proved faith in his Lord Jesus Christ. He acknowledged change was necessary. And he modeled the Christian life.

God has given each one of us various vocations in life, and we are responsible to Him for how we live out those vocations. May He grant us the wisdom and humility to live a repentant life and confess our faith in Jesus Christ and His forgiveness.

*Now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen (Hebrews 13:20-21 ESV).*

## Practical Application

If an employer contemplates releasing an employee on the basis of unrepentance, consider some practical applications.

1. Tie unrepentance to existing policies (e.g., ungodly life, failure to exhibit Christian character, etc.) and Scripture (e.g., Proverbs 8:13; 28:13; 1 John 1:8-10; 1 Timothy 3:2; 4:12, 16; Titus 1:7.). Proactively identify persistent unrepentance as a cause for termination in your employment policies or contracts.
2. List three reasons why unrepentance is grounds for termination:
  - a. Unrepentance is statement of unbelief.
  - b. Unrepentance means that the worker doesn't understand what he did wrong, and therefore the supervisor can expect the employee to repeat the offensive behavior.
  - c. Unrepentance serves as an unchristian example for others to follow.
3. Address this issue as soon as it becomes evident and document the admonition in the employee's file.
4. Provide multiple opportunities for repentance.
5. Continue to document specific words and actions that demonstrate unrepentance.
6. Be open to learning how management may have failed to address this issue earlier and respond appropriately. Unrepentance by the supervisor is serious, just as it is for the employee.
7. Should the employee repent and confess the wrongdoing, proclaim God's forgiveness. However, point out that while forgiveness removes the consequence of eternal separation from God, it does not necessarily remove earthly consequences. Document what has taken place.
8. If the employee persists in unrepentance and separation occurs as a result, remain open to future repentance and reconciliation even though the employment relationship has ceased.

For more information, see [www.aorhope.org](http://www.aorhope.org) or call Ambassadors of Reconciliation at 406-698-6107.

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