

Joel Webbon's Past Sin & Repentance

Introduction

Walking with integrity takes on a profound dimension when viewed through a Christian lens, as it becomes a reflection of one's devotion to God and to God's truth. For a Christian, integrity means living in a way that honors Christ and aligning actions with the teachings of Scripture. It's about being a faithful steward of the grace given through Jesus' sacrifice - knowing that integrity isn't just a personal virtue, but a testimony to the transformative power of the Holy Spirit.

In the context of Christian ministry, integrity also carries an eternal weight. It's not merely about earning human respect, but about glorifying God and pointing others to Him. As Christ's followers, we're called to imitate Him, even when it means taking up our cross in a world that often mocks righteousness or rewards compromise.

Yet, the Christian walk of integrity isn't a solo endeavor or a claim to perfection. It's sustained by grace and rooted in humility. We'll stumble - sin is real - but the cross offers redemption and restoration. Integrity, then, includes confessing our failures to God, seeking forgiveness, and pressing on in faith, as Paul urges in Philippians 3:13-14. It's a daily surrender to the Holy Spirit, asking for strength to choose what's right when the cost is high.

We always knew - me, my family, my elders and deacons, and my ministry and board - that as God magnified our influence and increased our reach, that an adversary (of one kind or other), perhaps many, would do what they always do in the face of God's work, which is to attack God's people. And we resolved from the very beginning that when that day came to stand firm, to stand straight, to lean upon our convictions and rest upon God's grace.

With nothing to hide, and everything of Christ's to exult in, I'm thankful for the opportunity to show you a grace that is greater than my sin.

Providing Some Context

In November of 2023, my former elders from the church I pastored in San Diego, California sent me a letter outlining three concerns. The concerns were as follows:

- 1) They believed that I was "reneging" my previous repentance. In 2020, these men corrected me in specific areas where they believed I needed to grow. I told them then, and I continue to believe the same now, that the categories of sins which they identified were valid, and that I was committed to growing in sanctification. However, I disagreed with the severity of which they believed I was guilty, and I also disagreed with the manner in which they corrected me.
- 2) They believed that I took Right Response Ministries in a way that was dishonest, and bordered on theft.
- 3) They always knew of my past sin, prior to being ordained, but, after my departure from San Diego, they discovered that I had not explicitly confessed one of those past sins in particular during my church planting assessment with the Acts 29 Network.

When I personally received this letter from them, I immediately shared it with the men who currently serve as Covenant Bible Church's elders and deacons. I also shared it with the board members of Right Response Ministries. Together, we contacted my former elders in San Diego to seek to resolve the situation. We provided clarity where we believed these men were wrong or confused, apologies where we believed I had failed, and restitution where we felt it would be most glorifying to God in quickly achieving peace.

In Regards To "Reneging" My Previous Repentance

First and foremost, I was never removed from ministry or deemed to be disqualified. Rather, I received a weighty formal correction from my former elders in the summer of 2020, in which they stated that I must pursue serious sanctification in specific areas, which they clearly identified.

Consider these words from my former elders' original letter of correction, presented to me in June of 2020:

“Before we say another word, we want to be clear from the get-go, we do not think you are immediately disqualified, we do not think you need to step down from your position of elder or main preaching pastor, and we are confident you can repent in the necessary ways so that you may fulfill these roles for a lifetime, Lord willing. We are not at this time suspending any of your responsibilities and our aim is to keep it that way.”

Yes, I was formally corrected by my elders. However, they unanimously deemed me to be repentant, and continued to affirm my qualifications for eldership. It is true, that a couple years after I departed from San Diego, they began to have doubts about whether or not my repentance had been genuine. However, upon receiving a letter from them in November of 2023, which clearly expressed their concerns regarding this matter, I, my elders at Covenant Bible Church, and the board members of Right Response Ministries were able to conduct a meeting with all my former elders and deacons from San Diego Reformed Church. This meeting was incredibly thorough, lasting several hours. By the end of it, my former elders and deacons agreed that I was, in fact, continuing to walk in genuine repentance. And they were all satisfied to leave me in the grace of God with simply a charge to continue to seek accountability and sanctification in the areas where I may require it.

In Regards To The Rightful Ownership And Origins Of Right Response Ministries

During my tenure as Senior Pastor in San Diego, not a dime was ever misallocated.

The elders voted three separate times each year regarding every line item of the church's budget, including the amount to be apportioned towards social media (once as elders, a second time as members of the financial counsel, and a third time as members of the congregation). The money which was allocated towards social media was to be spent on two major line items: 1) Facebook ads, and 2) staff (one part-time employee which the elders unanimously agreed to hire in order to manage the church's social media accounts).

The chief purpose in running Facebook ads was to attract people to our church. Our church had no building or signage throughout the week. Facebook was our way of creating week-long visibility for the church. Nathan Elam and I would spend time together each Monday to edit multiple clips from the most recent sermon, as well as convert my sermon notes into a weekly blog. We primarily ran Facebook ads in order to attract people to attend the church on Sunday mornings. From 2015-2020, one of the primary ways people found our church was through Facebook. These individuals/families gave generously in their tithes and offerings over the years. The church received far above the amount that it spent towards social media.

Regarding the decision to bifurcate the church's social media pages into a separate 501(c)3 (Right Response Ministries), the elders voted twice (once at the elders table, and once as members of the congregation). Both votes were unanimous. This took place in 2019.

At the end of my tenure as Senior Pastor in San Diego, our Twitter account had approximately 500

followers (now ~32,000), our YouTube channel had approximately 950 subscribers (now ~120,000), our Instagram page had approximately 4,500 followers (now ~15,000), and our Facebook page had approximately 50,000 fans. Since leaving San Diego, Right Response has designated its primary focus on YouTube, with a secondary focus on Twitter/X. We basically stopped using Instagram and Facebook. The total value of our YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram, at the time of my departure to Texas (December 2020), was meager at best. The Facebook page was significantly more valuable at the time of my departure (since it had ~50,000 fans).

So to rectify this grievance, Right Response Ministries happily gave the Facebook page back to San Diego Reformed Church, and also wrote them a check for \$25,000 (\$5,000 for Instagram, Twitter, and Youtube, and \$20,000 to reimburse them for financial support that they generously provided to Right Response Ministries in the year of 2020, before we left).

All of this was settled over a year ago, and as God is my witness, we would have settled it much sooner if we had known earlier that San Diego Reformed Church believed they had been wronged. This concern was not communicated to us until November of 2023. Once we were informed, we immediately sought to make it right.

Since restitution has been made, and reconciliation has occurred, my wife and I were privileged to be invited to go back and visit San Diego Reformed Church. We happily accepted their gracious invitation, and made the trip in September of 2024, and I was honored to get to preach at my old church on a Sunday morning.

In Regards To My Past Sexual Immorality

As a younger man, both in high school and in college, I sinned in the area of sexual immorality. These past sins have been confessed, but the Lord was still sanctifying me in this area. I had still not conquered the sin of lust. Sadly, I also failed in this area during my first few years in Southern California.

After college, I moved to San Diego with a few of my closest friends in the hopes of planting a church with the Association of Vineyard Churches. We began holding weekly meetings in a small music venue in the fall of 2011. We were in our early to mid 20's, and brimming with immaturity. I was not qualified to plant a church, both in regards to my doctrine and my character (this has been my consistent public testimony for several years now). During these first few years in San Diego, we led a glorified Bible-study on Sunday evenings. The participants consisted of young singles, mostly college students and some military. Most of the individuals who attended our Sunday evening meetings would go to an established church on Sunday mornings and then attend our meetings in the evenings, merely as supplemental.

It is important to note that I was not an ordained minister during this time. The Vineyard did not ordain me, and our rag-tag community had no other ordained elders, no deacons, and even no church membership.

Now, to be clear, if you had asked us during this time if what we were leading was a "church" and whether or not I was a "pastor," my friends and I would have all said yes. This was during the height of the church-planting obsession in American Evangelicalism. Tragically, there was an abundance of Christian organizations that would not hesitate to call any young man with a little charisma, who happened to be leading a Bible-study in his parents' garage, a "church-planter." And so, in our youthful zeal, heavily clouded by immaturity and ignorance, we fell for this deception – hook, line, and sinker. I did not learn about proper ecclesiology, valid ordination of church officers, and proper biblical church membership until later. Therefore, both functionally and in accordance with true biblical standards, our "ministry" was little more than a young

adults/singles program. In short: it was not a church, and I was not a pastor.

It wasn't until later that I subjected myself to an assessment/training process with the Acts 29 Network, which lasted almost a year. And it wasn't until after my process of assessment and training was complete, that we officially planted an Acts 29 church in San Diego, California. Shortly after this, I was married to my wife. Up until this point, I was an unmarried, single man who shouldn't have been leading anything, not even an unofficial ministry for young single adults. But again, I was young, sinful, and stupid.

Now, during our glorified singles ministry days, I dated a young woman who was attending our Sunday evening meetings, and we were sexually immoral. To put it plainly, we fornicated. Again, I was not ordained or married at the time (this took place approximately 12 & ½ years ago). After a few months of dating, we both felt convicted of our sin and decided to call off the relationship and confess our sin (we were not caught, we confessed). I confessed to my three closest friends who had moved out to California with me from college, as well as the representative appointed to me by the Association of Vineyard Churches (as I was originally working towards planting a Vineyard church at that time). My three friends were my roommates, and the only real accountability I had at the time (in addition to the Vineyard rep mentioned above). All of these men (including the Vineyard rep) agreed that it was right to end the relationship, and they worked to hold me accountable for mortifying the sin of lust. However, there was one significant failure. They did not ask me to step down. They insisted that I pursue sexual purity from that moment on, but they allowed me to continue leading our Sunday evening meetings.

Therefore, it is important to note that there were two sins, not merely one, which were committed in these early years in San Diego. The first sin was my sexual immorality, and the second sin was not stepping down from all forms of leadership after the first sin occurred. Our pathetic "church-planting" attempt in those early years was a joke. I was a joke. Nothing was legitimate by any real, biblical standard. Regardless, the whole thing should have immediately stopped. Regardless of any counsel I received at the time, I should have shut it down. When people ask me today what I would have done differently, without any equivocation, this is what I tell them:

"I should have canceled the Sunday evening meetings, immediately joined a solid biblical church, and faithfully served there (without being in any leadership role) for multiple years, before ever considering the possibility of attempting to church plant in the future."

Now the reason why these two sins are likely to become publicly known is because they have always been incredibly easy to discover. Why? Because they weren't secret sins, but by the grace of God, they were thoroughly confessed sins. Over the years, I confessed both of these previous failures to likely around a couple hundred people. I informed every man who ever served as an elder in the church in San Diego of my past sins, and they knew of these sins prior to being appointed as elders. In addition to all the elders, I shared my past failures with many of the church members who I developed close relationship with over the years. However, it is true that I did not confess my fornication with this particular woman in my Acts 29 church planting assessment. I confessed the sins which I was asked about (the primary focus was on those which I was currently struggling with at the time of my assessment), rather than particular sins which I had committed prior to my assessment.

On that note, every board member of Right Response Ministries knows about my past failures. The eldership of Covenant Bible Church knows. The deacons of Covenant Bible Church know. The members of Covenant Bible Church know. My wife, of course, knew prior to both our engagement and marriage. And, as previously mentioned, many other friends of ours are fully aware, and have been for years.

By God's grace, I've been walking in sexual purity for over 12 years. God has been exceedingly faithful.

In summary, I am a very great sinner. In fact, those who oppose my ministry probably don't even know the half of it. But fortunately, Jesus is an even greater Savior. He not only forgives, but in his unparalleled kindness and mercy, he restores and redeems beyond what any of us can imagine.

****Please Note: All the elders (3) and deacons (3) of Covenant Bible Church are in agreement with the truthfulness of this statement. In addition, all the board members (5) of Right Response Ministries are also in agreement with the truthfulness of this statement.***

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