

# Editorial: Tony Evans, Robert Morris and restoration

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*CAUTION: This editorial discusses sexual abuse and its consequences.*

Two Dallas-area megachurch pastors made the news during the last week. Their stories give us a chance to think about how we respond when pastors sin.

## Two megachurch pastors

On Oct. 5, following a restoration process after admitting a year ago to an undisclosed sin, [Tony Evans](#) told his congregation he would not return to lead Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship, the church he founded.

On Oct. 2, [Robert Morris](#), founder of Gateway Church, pleaded guilty in an Oklahoma courtroom “to five counts of lewd and indecent acts with a child” he committed in the 1980s. He [resigned from Gateway](#) in June 2024 after Cindy Clemishire accused him of molesting her.

Stories like these have been too common over the last several years. They raise important questions about how Christian leaders should be held accountable for their sin, what that accountability should be, when or if a Christian leader can or should be restored, and what restoration should be.

A *Baptist Standard* reader asked me some of those questions the day after Morris was escorted out of the courtroom by Osage County sheriff’s deputies.

# Questions

The reader, who gave me permission to include his questions here, asked me: “Since there is no evidence of any similar activity” by Morris in the last 40 years, and since he went on to grow a prominent church, “when does your past sin stop following you while you are building good things on behalf of God?”

I feel you bristling. While you bristle, consider that the questioner is trying honestly to grapple with the messy meeting of sin, accountability and reconciliation. We all need to grapple honestly with this.

In answer to the question, though: Morris’ sin didn’t need Clemishire’s accusation to pick up his scent and start following him. His sin followed him just fine on its own all those 40-plus years. That’s what unconfessed sin does.

If a person kept sinning, our reader continued, he shouldn’t be in ministry.

Some would say Morris did keep sinning by not telling the truth for 40-plus years.

“Should something that was committed 40 years ago be enough to stop anyone from repenting and going forward in the name of God? When does he recover?” our reader concluded.

By the time I got to the end of our reader’s email, I had so many thoughts lining up in my mind that I opted to take the weekend before responding. And when I did, I still couldn’t address all the questions adequately. I can’t here, either. We need a conversation for that.

We can start, however, by looking at similarities and differences in Evans’ and Morris’ stories. The similarities in their stories are striking, but they pale in comparison to the significant differences.

# Comparing situations

Evans' sin, still publicly undisclosed, seems to have occurred recently. Morris' sin occurred more than 40 years ago.

Evans maintains his sin was not a criminal act. Morris' sin absolutely was criminal, punishable by the state.

As far as we know, Evans admitted his sin on his own and took himself out of church leadership.

Two days after Clemishire's accusation, Morris told *The Christian Post* he "was involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with a young lady" while in his early 20s. He left out how old she was. When Clemishire's accusation made that detail known, Gateway leadership said Morris had confessed to "a moral failure," but they had "no idea the person involved was a minor."

Evans underwent a restoration process. Morris may or may not do so, unless one thinks incarceration and sex-offender registration is a restoration process. It is not.

At the conclusion of his restoration process, [it was announced](#) Evans announced would not return to staff or leadership role at Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship. Morris, well, we're not that far yet into Morris' story.

## How long?

Let's go back to the questions our reader posed and focus as he did on Morris.

Should there be a statute of limitations for Christians? Going back to the facts of Morris' story: Morris wasn't forthright about what he did until he was publicly accused. Meanwhile, his sin impacted Clemishire for a full 40

years and more. As the old spiritual says, “You can run on for a long time, but sooner or later, God’ll cut you down.”

About repentance: Nothing and no one can stop a person from repenting, but repentance is different than accountability. Repent or not, we’re still accountable for our sin. When that sin violates human law—which Morris’ did—we’re also accountable to the state.

How about forgiveness? Should Morris be forgiven? While Scripture tells us to forgive those who sin against us, this again is a different thing than accountability. We need to let go of the fallacy that holding people accountable for their sin negates forgiveness.

Sexual abuse is wrong; it is evil. Sexual abuse is sin, and sin has consequences.

Sexual abuse harms a person in profound ways that are not easy to “just get over.” Clemishire has lived more than 40 years with the consequences of Morris’ sin. Anyone who thinks she hasn’t worked on “getting over it” doesn’t know what sexual abuse does to a person or how much work she’s likely done.

## **Restoration?**

And then there’s that last question: “When does he recover?”

That question really sent my mind to work. First, what do we mean by “recover?” Sometimes, we use “recover” and “restore” interchangeably. Their definitions typically are person- and situation-specific.

Second, recovery or restoration is not the same thing as returning to a ministry position, much less one so prominent, though a person eventually might serve in a completely different capacity. This doesn’t mean that person hasn’t recovered or been restored. Also, just because a person is

“restored,” doesn’t mean that person has “recovered.”

If I was making the decision, I would not return Morris to the pulpit and absolutely would not give him leadership over minors.

I still haven’t answered “when.” We need a conversation for that, and the affected people need to be part of it. We can’t do that in an email thread or editorial.

Tony Evans and Robert Morris are two very public and prominent figures. They’ve held themselves up to countless people for decades as examples of Christian living. We ought to learn from them now, even if we’d rather not have to learn how to face a pastor’s sin, or our own.

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