

# Rebuilding Broken Trust



by J. ALASDAIR GROVES

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Are you struggling to trust someone because that person has hurt you and you are worried it will happen again? Maybe the hurt was a devastating single event: a spouse had an affair, a friend betrayed a very sensitive secret, or a co-worker stabbed you in the back. Or maybe the break in trust comes from a long pattern of small injuries: a mother who never pursued you or showed interest in your feelings, or a spouse who has been content to be a distant roommate for years. These are like open wounds; you are constantly aware of the injury; the ache and rawness keep you alert. I'm speaking of a metaphorical "wound," but even in a literal sense, broken trust is also felt physically. Living with the nagging question, "Will it happen again?" knots your stomach, squeezes your chest, and keeps your shoulders clenched. Few things have the power to consume one's waking moments like strained or broken trust.<sup>1</sup>

Broken trust raises questions. Can I or should I ever trust that person again? And what does Paul's statement from the famous "love chapter"—"love *always* trusts"—mean (1 Cor 13:7)? It sounds lovely at weddings, but loses its loveliness and becomes confusing, or even

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1. This article will not focus on situations in which people unfairly withhold trust from others, or those situations where it is necessary to withhold trust due to ongoing abuse (see footnote 8). My goal here is narrower: to help those who have suffered genuine wrong in an ongoing relationship rebuild trust when and where it is wise.

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oppressive, when you learn your spouse has been lying to you. Does Paul mean I have to trust even when the other person seems untrustworthy?

Perhaps most difficult of all: Do I even want to?

I am writing this article to help you answer these questions in a way that fits the specific contours of your situation. To do so, we will start with the most basic questions: Must you and should you rebuild trust, and, if so, when? As we consider what wise trust looks like, I will work hard to keep in view that your deepest trust must be in Christ's trustworthy care for you and your situation, not in how much trust you can or should place in other sinners. After addressing if and when to rebuild trust, we will tackle the more difficult question of dealing with your heart and whether you are willing to trust again. Naturally, all the practical advice in the world about when or how to rebuild trust will not be helpful if you do not actually *want* to rebuild trust. We will finish by learning from one woman who slowly and courageously rebuilt a Christ-centered, wisely-tempered, hard-fought trust in her husband.

## Questions about Rebuilding Trust

Struggles with trust come in many shapes and sizes. It could be a response to a direct, flagrant betrayal like an affair or full-blown addiction. It could come from the constant chafing you feel at someone's subtle tendency to bend the truth or keep information from you until it is forced out. Whatever the specific nature of the betrayal, questions emerge: Should you give your trust to the offending person again? And if so, when?

***Should you rebuild trust?*** Does the Bible require you to trust your loved ones at all times, no matter what? When 1 Corinthians 13:7 says that love "believes all things" (ESV, NASB) or "always trusts" (NIV), does that require you to take everything at face value from your friend, spouse, child, or colleague, even if it flies in the face of the evidence? Many people believe love requires this, and they feel guilty and discouraged when they feel they can no longer trust someone.

But it *is* possible to love without trusting. In fact, to put the biblical perspective more strongly, love will not trust what is not trustworthy. To do so would be the height of folly and would do great damage to the one you claim to love! It would be destructive and *unloving* to trust your three-year-old to play unsupervised next to a hot stove or stay away

from a forbidden plate of cookies on the counter. It would be not only foolish but *unkind* to believe your husband's claim that he doesn't need accountability software because he has no interest in ever looking at pornography again. And consider this quote from Ed Welch's blog titled *Does Love Really Believe All Things?*:

[You] *are* allowed to raise questions when your sixteen-year-old child says that he smells like alcohol because he happened to be walking down the street with friends and a drunk with an open bottle stumbled and spilled beer all over him. Better yet, you *must* raise questions [about such an implausible excuse]...a parent who questions this child's credibility is a blessing to the child.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, the answer is that love does not believe all things when circumstances indicate otherwise.

If you think about it, the Bible actually demands that you not utterly trust in any human being; instead, you are to expect sin and weakness in everyone you encounter (Ps 103:13–16; 146:3; Jer 17:5). For example, no one questions Paul's love for the churches he planted, yet he repeatedly warns them against various temptations and sins. There would be no need to warn the Galatians against legalism or the Corinthians against hedonism if he fully trusted them never to sin. Indeed, a wise *distrust* of their self-control in the face of lusts, rivalries, pride, and selfishness forms an important part of his love for the members of these churches.

Following Jesus does not mean that you throw common sense out the window. Instead, love raises important questions and challenges, when needed, to protect and help those it cares for. This is what Paul did with his churches and what Jesus did with his disciples and the crowds who were drawn to him (e.g., John 2:24–25). Love does not put blind faith in those it knows will not be able to be faithful.

Love does not trust what is untrustworthy.

What then does Paul mean when he writes "love always trusts"? Given Paul's example of admonishing believers in Corinth, Galatia, and other places, we can be confident that his call to "always trust" cannot

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2. Ed Welch, "Does Love Really Believe All Things?" CCEF, April 26, 2012, <https://www.ccef.org/does-love-really-believe-all-things/>.

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