

Keeping Confidences

How can we know whether we should keep something confidential unless we are told what it is? Working in drug rehabilitation for many years, and hearing everything from drug deals about to go down to robberies being planned soon taught me my obligations are to God, the law, my conscience and my fellow human beings. It was certainly not to someone who wanted to manipulate me and hold me to ransom by giving me secrets I could not share should I see fit to!

I was once told confidentially about a serious child abuse situation, which involved incest of the worst kind by a pastor of a church! Should this be kept secret? Not on your life! That man spent a long time behind bars and his children were rescued, but he went to jail feeling betrayed and never fully understood why his church and freedom had been taken from him!

If a secret is a secret, let it remain a secret. Tell no one! If you need to unburden yourself, tell someone you trust, and tell them the truth! Trust they will look after your best interests, and don't hold them in bondage to a promise they should never have agreed to. They may not be able to cope with what you tell them and need to seek advice from someone senior, whom they trust. This is a right and proper procedure not always practised in churches, but it should be in my view!

Unity in the Local Church

Unity is where the **life** of the church dwells. Unity is where the **power** is; it is where the **passion** is; it is where the **love** is; it is where the **blessing** resides. Gossip destroys unity, suppresses vision and promotes division. The blessing flows to and from a unified people. Another word for unity is **"agreement"**. Unity costs something, both personally and corporately. Unity takes time and effort to establish and be an integral part of any church culture. Unity attracts the lost as well as believers who have been hurt and wounded by churches that do not express unity or love as part of their fabric and makeup. Unity, and loving one another, is our highest calling.

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35)

What does it mean to love one another? Love means many things. Love means sacrifice, care, concern, protection, security, honesty, integrity, and not being afraid. Love covers things that would otherwise be exposed. Love is patient and kind. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails (1Cor 13:4-8a).

Jesus loves His Church, and the gates of hell will never prevail against it! The manifold wisdom of God is revealed to His church (Eph 3:10). Jesus is the head of the church (Col 1:18) while we exist and function as His body (Eph 5:30-32).

Whenever brothers and sisters gather there is plenty of potential for strife and disunity. Churches are no different, albeit we are the family of God and heirs of the kingdom. We are all different, coming from diverse backgrounds with differing experiences and expectations. We are gifted differently and motivated by different things. We often have differing standards, beliefs, attitudes, goals, ambitions and desires, but it is to this very group to which God commands the blessing! When we're of one mind, and one heart before God, we are part of a powerful and unstoppable spiritual force - the mighty and indestructible Church of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:10)!

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Dealing with ... GOSSIP and DIVISION

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The line between
Gossip and Division
is very thin



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church address
the issue of Gossip?



How to avoid
becoming a
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How to build unity
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relationships in
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DEFINING GOSSIP

The Cambridge Dictionary defines 'gossip' as:

“Conversation or reports about other people's private lives that might be unkind, disapproving, or untrue”

It further goes on to disrobe a 'gossip' as:

“Someone who enjoys talking about other people and their private lives”

The same dictionary defines 'divisive' as:

“Causing people to be split into groups that disagree with or oppose each other”

Divisive is an adjective related to the word divide, or division.

Christian Behaviour

Gossip is a serious problem for many, and the church is no different. Not addressing this topic can lead to division and much upset at times.

Our behaviour as Christians, and the way we choose to live our lives ethically and morally, depends much upon our particular world view, cultural background, past experience and present understanding of God's Word. The last is an important deciding factor that ultimately determines the quality of our Christian walk, and represents the foundational standards we choose for our life.

We can easily fall into temptation and sin if our experience and understanding of how God would have us behave in relation to what we say and who we share confidences with is lacking in some way. James calls the tongue a “restless evil”:

“No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so” (James 3:8-10)

The Power of the Tongue

Words have power. One of the most misunderstood and perhaps undisciplined areas of church life today is in the area of the tongue. The Bible tells us that we all stumble in many ways, but if we can control our tongue then God considers us almost perfect (James 3:2). What an astonishing statement! So controlling our tongue is directly linked to Godly abundantly blessing our lives!

You see, our tongue controls our whole being, so if we control the tongue we pretty much control everything else as well:

“For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. Now if we put bits into the horses' mouths so that they may obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Behold, the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder, wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire” (James 3:2-5)

I soon discovered they actually liked being miserable and negative, and when gossip began to rear its head, with people whispering and “confidentially” sharing views and secrets about other people, I knew we had a problem on our hands which we had not had to contend with before. We had previously escaped this green-eyed monster, and didn't realise what a blessing it was to be free in this area until we suddenly found we were not anymore!

After making a decision to deal with this matter, hopefully with a degree of grace and tact, I addressed the issue by exposing it to the light. Not publicly, but privately, one by one, couple by couple, with spectacular results!

A small group of people were the primary trouble-makers. Finding themselves exposed they decided to leave. Having believed God called them to be part of our church, He had now apparently changed His mind!

I have since learned this is a common tactic when darkness is exposed to the light in such a way. However, the truly genuine people who wanted to grow and become part of a gossip free church stayed, and it was like a breath of fresh air that instantly swept through the congregation, and a great weight we didn't know we were carrying was lifted!

“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless” (James 1:26)

“For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (James 3:16-18)

What About Those Secrets?

Let's address this issue of confidences and secrets.

Having secrets or sharing secrets is fine among close friends, adolescent teenagers and young children. However, secrets can be used as a method of controlling someone by holding them to a confidence they might be better off not knowing, or need to share with someone who can help them.

Some believers think that being confidential means acting like a Catholic priest, who hears a confession and protects the secrets he hears with his life! This is a completely wrong approach, and we should never support such a view.

Holding a confidence is one thing, whispering secrets is something else entirely. By all means keep a friend's confidence, and don't be a talebearer. A true friend will never uncover a brother or sister, or anyone else for that matter.

It is foolish to imagine we don't talk about one another. In fact it can be unhealthy if we don't! We should share concerns, joys, sorrows and problems, and when one of our brothers or sisters is troubled and not able to sort it out for themselves, we should find a way to help them, if they will let us.

At some point, especially if a matter is serious enough, this may mean discussing their situation with someone you trust in a leadership position. This should not be confused with gossip or breaking trust. Even doctors share medical information among with select colleagues in order to aid a patient's speedy recovery.

We must always guard against keeping secrets in an ungodly way that doesn't bring glory to God. Always promote healing and unity among brothers and sisters in Christ, and avoid being found in uncomfortable or compromising positions as a result. If you are ever asked and agree to keep something confidential, then do so.

Addressing Gossip and Division

A lot of hurt can be avoided or minimised by consistently promoting an open and honest philosophy regarding how we relate to one another when issues arise that might otherwise cause distress and division.

Not everyone is ready to listen, receive advice or change. That's fine as long as they do not seek to harm others, albeit unintentionally. Pain, anger or confusion can create resistance that we may sometimes need to be patient with in order to be helpful. Of course most gossip is of a minor nature, more driven by habit, and is perhaps sourced in loneliness or depression, or maybe anger at a perceived slight.

All slander, talebearing and gossip which is based on evil intent, bitterness of spirit, immaturity, unforgiveness or any other form of unacceptable behaviour, is inappropriate in good company, and especially so in the believer.

It is the hidden reefs in our love feasts (Jude 1:14), the wolves in sheep's clothing, the agents of darkness, who seem to find their way into all churches at one time or another, that we need to be aware of. If such people are unwilling to repent or see the error of their ways we are often unable to help them. They may have an axe to grind, or a hidden agenda incompatible with the vision of the church. Either way the Bible warns us that we need to mark, confront and, if necessary as a last resort, ask such people to leave (Matt 18:15-20).

The Bible is not always sweetness and light. Sometimes it instructs us to do things that we may find hard to understand, but wisdom dictates we strive to ensure we are across God's intent on such topics. For example, we are encouraged to "purge the evil" from among us (Deut 13:5 & Gal 6:1-5), which includes slanderous gossips, with a view to restoring that person to forgiveness and fellowship. We are not out to punish and purge, but to correct and restore. The words of Chuck Girard's classic song, *Don't Shoot The Wounded*, is a sombre reminder of the important to do so with care and caution, or "one day you might be one".

"But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned" (Titus 3:9-11)

Dealing with Gossip - A Personal Testimony

I was the pastor in a church some years ago when we experienced an incident where a number of disgruntled people joined us *en-masse* from another Pentecostal church. Our church was about 18 months old, and we thought revival had come because these people swelled our numbers and looked, on the surface, like quality people who had left a less than desirable situation to join us.

The alarm bell began to sound fairly quickly when they started to become vocally and overtly critically of their old church leadership. This distressed me because I knew all the parties involved, and the weaknesses of their old church, but I counted the other pastor and church leaders as friends, and disliked the way they were being vilified by those who a short time earlier had been active in the church, some on a leadership level. Naively, I suspect at the time, I couldn't understand why they had stayed so long if they were so miserable about their church, or indeed why they felt the need to do this once they had chosen to move on and join us.

Warnings For People Who Love to Gossip

***"From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing.
My brothers, these things ought not to be so" (James 3:10)***

James is warning us about being caught up in gossip and slander. Many who find themselves caught in this web of loose talk are often actually promoting division in the church without realising it. The Bible calls people who engage in such loose talk "*blights on our love feasts*" (Jude 1:10-13). God clearly hates gossip:

"You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbour; I am the Lord" (Lev 19:16)

***"He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets,
but he who is trustworthy conceals a matter" (Prov 11:13)***

***"He who goes about as a slanderer reveals secrets,
therefore do not associate with a gossip" (Prov 20:19)***

***"And at the same time they also learn to be idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies,
talking about things not proper to mention" (1 Tim 5:13)***

Again, James calls the tongue a "*restless evil*" that must be "*tamed*":

"And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed, and has been tamed by the human race" (James 3:6-7)

It is important to differentiate between what is simply an exchange of useful information or a sharing of a problem in order to secure a solution, and gossip; between what is malicious gossip or what may be innocent, even naïve, talebearing. God doesn't mind us talking to one another or about one another. It is our heart attitude that determines our motives, and His response to our guilt or innocence.

Division and Discord in Church

Most of the problems associated with Gossip will not come from the unchurched or a new believer who finds Christ and get involved in the church with an eagerness and enthusiasm which can be infectious. No, it will likely come from those who have known the Lord for a while and not dealt with their issues of hidden sin and poor attitudes.

Such people may already be in our midst with no one addressing the potential danger, while others may join the church from somewhere else, perhaps with a history of moving from one church to another, for one reason or another. Some people may simply not be schooled adequately in the ways of righteousness, or how to resolve disputes or disagreements.

Gossip is something we all partake in from time to time. Like all sinful behaviour, God is willing and able to forgive our sin once we realise it and confess it to him. If we have wronged someone with our words, we may need to seek restitution and apologise, but mostly these are mild missteps, easily dealt with. Then there are those who are not "casual gossips", who may harbour a deeper and more sinister aspect to their loose talk, seeking to influence others to their way of thinking by negative and destructive means.

We must be aware of those who sow discord, and be alert to the inherent risks they pose in spite of their otherwise excellent gifts and kingdom ambitions. We cannot allow our church to be undermined by anyone with a bitter and unforgiving spirit! Our goal is always reconciliation and restoration. If we can help them we should do so, but if we can't then we should commit them to God and release them with our blessing.

Most people want to be part of a healthy church, enjoying the freedom and friendliness that they seek without the risks associated with unhealthy cliques and negatively inclined people.

It takes all kinds of people to make up a church, and all should be made welcome. However, in any group dynamic there needs to be positive and helpful leadership in place to avoid any sort of 'pack' or 'clique' mentality arising. The enemy of our souls is often referred to as a 'wolf' after all, and those who promote discord are referred to as working for the enemy. Remember, wolves among the flock do not a healthy sheepfold make!

Wolf References in the Bible

There are many 'wolf' references and passages in the Bible carrying both warning and instruction. Many are specifically relevant to our modern-day church life. My view is that the most dangerous wolves today can be found in the church, though they are often hidden until revealed. They can wreak a harvest of devastation if allowed to rampage around unchecked.

In Matt 7:15. Delivering His great "Sermon on the Mount" Jesus instructs the people to "*Beware of false prophets, in sheep's clothing, who inwardly are ravenous wolves*". He states clearly that they will be known by their fruits.

In Matt 10:16. Jesus is telling His disciples they are being sent out to gather the lost sheep. These sheep are to be found "*in the midst of wolves*", so they are to be "*shrewd as serpents and innocent of doves*".

In John 10:12. Jesus refers to the difference between shepherds and hired hands, which is obviously a veiled reference to church leadership. The shepherd protects the sheep from wolves, the hired hand does not. Quite a sober reference for any pastor!

In Acts 20:28-30. Paul speaks to the elders of the church at Ephesus, knowing this would be the last time any of them would "*see his face*". He declares that after his departure "*wolves will come, not sparing the flock*", even going so far as to state categorically that "*men will arise from among you, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them*". Clearly, his was a strong influence that kept these evil men at bay, but his departure meant the overseers and elders would need to step up, be alert, and protect the flock of God. Again, sobering instruction for church leaders at every level.

Warnings about Controversies

You may have noticed since the outbreak of Covid that there is a heightened attitude to various conspiracy theories and extreme points of view in some quarters. Some sections of the church seem to be overly represented by these controversies, which the Bible says actually breeds quarrels:

"Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels" (2 Tim 2:23)

My view is that there have always been such controversies around on a myriad of topics, and they probably always will be. The digital age and social media especially gives both an outlet and an audience for such things. Truth gets lost in controversy, clicks become paramount at the sacrifice of good sense and reason. It seems to be part of the human condition to gravitate to such things. Just look at any news program or read any opinion piece on social media and you will see this tendency towards controversy and negativity to be alive and flourishing.

The Bible discourages us from entertaining discussions that tear down rather than build up. Paul continues to instruct Timothy in this vein:

"The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will" (2 Tim 24-26)

The challenge of our age is to promote truth of the Word of God in a balanced and accurate way to those with ears to hear.

"So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'" (John 8:31-32)

So, what is the truth? In simple terms it is not a philosophy, a controversy, a pet doctrine or personal viewpoint. The truth is a person:

"Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6)

"But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24)

Bitterness and Unforgiveness

Gossip can also find its source in a bitter or unforgiving spirit. As Christians we should always avoid entertaining a bitter spirit in ourselves or in another. Indeed, we should guard against it at all times. Bitterness and unforgiveness, no matter the justification, sets us at enmity with God, who cannot forgive us if we do not forgive those who sin against us (Matt 6:12-15). This can be tricky to discern, and problematic in practice, but understand it we must when such matters are revealed.

It is not always easy. Strong people can be intimidating. Hurt and wounded people may seem justified in their negativity and fear, and have a convincing argument to support their point of view. We are ultimately here to "*reach the lost, heal the wounded, and set the captives free*", as Jesus declared in Luke 4:18 when quoting a passage from Isaiah 61:1. Finding a way to help such people by loving them, accepting them, empathising with them, and leading them towards healing and deliverance is not an option, it's a command!

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18)